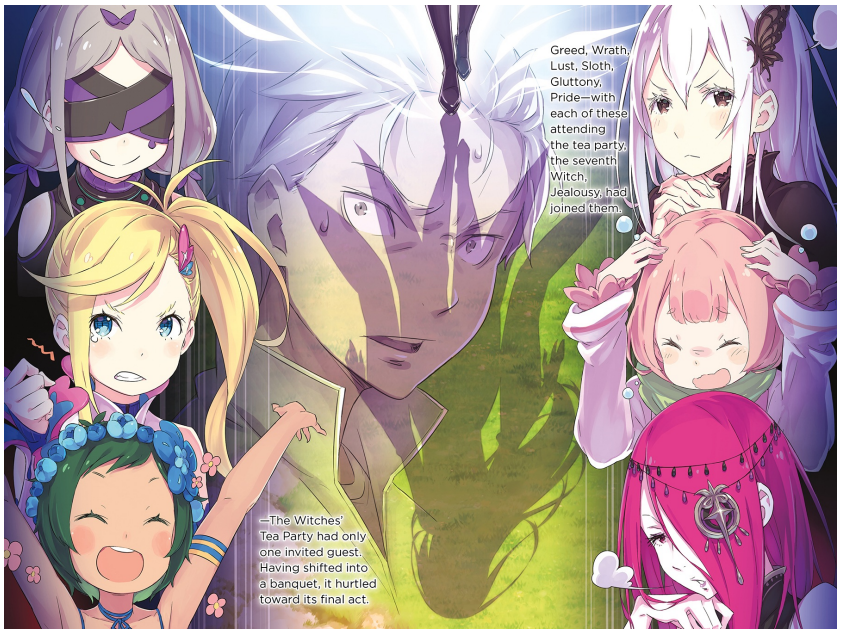
12
TAPPEI
NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY
SHINICHIROU
OTSUKA
Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-

Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-

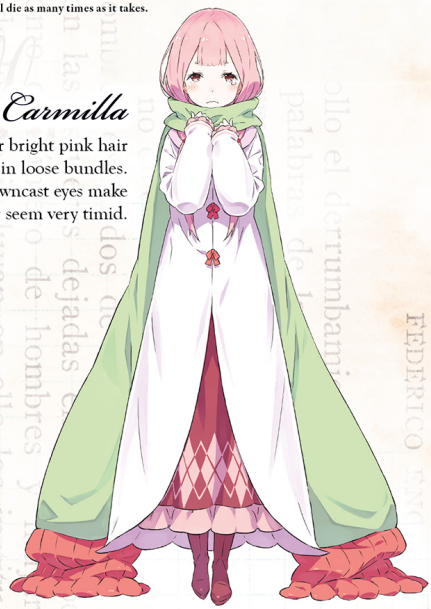
“—Behold the
unknowable present.”


Greed, Wrath, Lust, Sloth, Gluttony, Pride—with each of these attending the tea party, the seventh Witch, Jealousy, had joined them.
—The Witches' Tea Party had only one invited guest. Having shifted into a banquet, it hurtled toward its final act.

# Characters

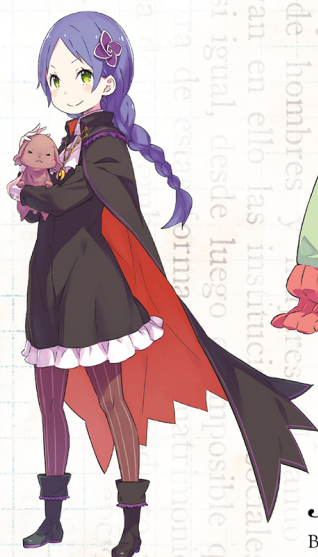
Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

**The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.**



## *Carmilla*

The Witch of Lust. Her bright pink hair reaches down to her hips in loose bundles. A beautiful girl whose downcast eyes make her seem very timid.



## *Meili*

Beast Master. Covered from head to toe in an outfit that is primarily black.

## *Sekhmet*

Witch of Sloth. The most distinct characteristic of this languid beauty is her long, unkempt purplish-red hair.

# Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

**The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.**

## CONTENTS


Chapter 1
Lovelovelovel

# Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-

## VOLUME 12

**TAPPEI NAGATSUKI**
**ILLUSTRATION: SHINICHIROU OTSUKA**

YEN ON
NEW YORK

# Copyright

Re:ZERO Vol. 12
TAPPEI NAGATSUKI

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque
Cover art by Shinichirou Otsuka

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Re:ZERO KARA HAJIMERU ISEKAI SEIKATSU Vol. 12
© Tappei Nagatsuki 2017
First published in Japan in 2017 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights reserved by YEN PRESS, LLC under the license from KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2020 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com
instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: February 2020

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Nagatsuki, Tappei, 1987– author. | Otsuka, Shinichirou, illustrator. | ZephyrRz, translator. | Bourque, Jeremiah, translator.
Title: Re:ZERO starting life in another world / Tappei Nagatsuki ; illustration by Shinichirou Otsuka ; translation by ZephyrRz ; translation by Bourque, Jeremiah
Other titles: Re:ZERO kara hajimeru isekai seikatsu. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2016– | Audience: Ages 13 & up.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016031562 | ISBN 9780316315302 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398374 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398404 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398428 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398459 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398473 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316398497 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975301934 (v. 8 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975356293 (v. 9 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975383169 (v. 10 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975383183 (v. 11 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975383206 (v. 12 : pbk.)
Subjects: CYAC: Science fiction. | Time travel—Fiction.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.N34 Re 2016 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016031562

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-8320-6 (paperback)
978-1-9753-8321-3 (ebook)

E3-20241108-JV-PC-COR

# Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Chapter 1: Lovelovelovel

# CHAPTER 1

## LOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVELOVEME

**1**

The whisper of love echoed.

It sweetly, gently echoed against his eardrums, his brain, his heart, his soul.

"—I love you."

The whisper of love was muffled.

Did it come from a man or a woman—? Even this was left vague.

But beyond any doubt, this whisper of love was directed at Subaru Natsuki and he alone.

A black wriggling shadow spoke to him softly.

It took the shape of a person, clad in a dress the color of darkness, with long raven-black hair. The shadow stared at him with an inky sable face.

Everything composing the shadow ensnared Subaru's mind and body, smothering him in sweetness.

"—I love you."

His thought process had ground to a halt. Subaru had even forgotten how to breathe. All he could manage was to simply gaze forward, unable to make the slightest move.

A dense miasma made his skin prickle as the terrible spectacle of the Sanctuary sank into shadow. Like a small animal encountering a menace so overpowering that it struggled to breathe, Subaru was trapped in a world that had lost its vitality, ripped out by its very roots.

Subaru knew this place. He had tasted its agony and despair over and over again.

This was the world that always appeared whenever he broke the taboo, a place where time stopped and the Witch—

"—I love you. I love you."

As Subaru was frozen in silence, the shadow slowly extended a finger toward his cheek.

He couldn't avoid it. The issue wasn't the shadow holding him down or anything like that.

His inability to move was because Subaru's own flesh and blood would not permit it. Subaru's soul refused to offer any resistance against the shadow.

Accordingly, the shadow touched Subaru as it pleased.

"—I love you. I love you. I love you."

Subaru couldn't sense any malice from the shadow. There was no animosity. But this wasn't because it was indifferent toward Subaru.

Indeed, quite the opposite.

The shadow inundated Subaru with an overwhelming level of adoration that bordered on madness.

It was blind, almost stubborn devotion—enough to make a person ask, *Why go to such lengths?* Subaru felt like he was being blotted out by the inescapably crazed passion—in that moment, the shadow had no interest in anything besides Subaru.

"—I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you."

The whispers of adoration swirled around inside Subaru's skull like they were caught in a vortex.

Love stirred his eardrums. Love drenched his brain. As love filled his consciousness to the brim, love was also boiling his soul until it fell to pieces. It was an assault by love, a slaughter by love, a violation by love.

"I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you."

Love controlled Subaru. Love had enslaved Subaru. Love was robbing Subaru of every drop of love he had—

"—Hey, stop screwin' around!!"

Suddenly, an unspeakably destructive force wedged itself between Subaru and the shadow's loving embrace. It crashed violently into the shadow, shattering the blackened earth. As a dark

shock wave erupted, the impact sent Subaru flying directly backward.

"Whoaa—?!"

Tumbling across the hard ground after landing, Subaru finally came to a halt when he slammed into an old graveyard wall. Once he gave his head a good shake and looked up, he noticed his mind had been freed from the supernatural fever that had gripped him only moments earlier.

Now that the static in his thoughts had cleared, he forced his eyes open to see what was happening. Then—

"This is seriously the worst-case scenario. Hey, can you move, damn it?"

—there was a voice. Subaru spotted golden hair and a short person backing away from the shadow.

Subaru recognized that abrasive tone and overflowing readiness to leap into battle. He remembered the sight of the peculiar stance that kept the body low to the ground and those bared fangs. The realization that he knew this person shook Subaru to his core.

Even in his wildest dreams he never would've guessed who would come to shield him from peril.

"Garfiel… Why are you…?!"

"You serious? In this situation? Don't make me laugh. Definitely not my first choice, but no way I ain't pickin' ya up."

Garfiel reacted to Subaru's shock with annoyance. Still wary of the shadow before him, he grabbed Subaru's collar even though the boy was still in a heap on the ground.

"We're jumpin'. Might break your neck but just grin 'n' bear it!"

"That really isn't somethin' you can just grin and b—?!"

Before Subaru could finish his quip, Garfiel tensed his knees and launched upward, drawing a *"Gwah!"* of agony out of Subaru as they escaped into the air—and a moment later, the shadow on the ground swelled up and exploded.

Rapidly gaining mass, the black shadow billowed into a wave that chased the flying pair, threatening to smash them flat. The black wave engulfed everything nearby, scattering destruction over a wide area with dreadful force and scale.

The cascade was so fierce that the forest, the houses, and even the Witch's tomb were indiscriminately swallowed whole.

"Don't go bitin' ya tongue now!!"

Subaru could only gape at the apocalyptic spectacle, but Garfiel

didn't falter.

Obeying his instincts, Garfiel continued bounding ahead in search of a foothold where they might find refuge from the wave. As the encroaching darkness cracked open the muddy ground and knocked over one tree after another, they leaped and leaped and leaped—

"C'mon! C'mooon! Hoaaaa!!"

As the black wave mowed down the forest—tearing up the very earth and blotting out the ground wherever it passed—everything Subaru could see was churned up and consumed by the shadow as it seemed to grow large enough to envelop the entire world. That was when Garfiel finally arrived at their destination.

There was a lone stonework house left standing at the edge of the settlement in the Sanctuary.

The moment he touched down onto its roof, Garfiel tossed Subaru some distance away while continuing to draw ragged breaths.

"Aww, damn it all!! That bastard…!"

"Th-thanks for saving me…"

"The hell? You sure don't seem like the type who'd say thanks. Ya got a problem or somethin', huh?"

Garfiel bared his fangs at Subaru, who was crawling along the roof. Looking up at the ferocious darkness forming overhead, Subaru grimaced. The discomfort he felt was showing on his face as well.

"I ain't complaining… It's just…I didn't think you'd save me, so…"

"Ha! Treatin' me like I got no heart or somethin'. The Rose Knights of Tileos have no need for cradles, y'know? If ya don't like it, go ahead and jump right into that thing's bosom."

"Sorry, I've already settled on a favorite bosom, so I'll pass."

Sighing at Garfiel's jab, Subaru gently placed a hand on his chest.

Besides the incomprehensible situation, there was another reason that made his heart leap. Getting saved by Garfiel was a shocking development.

After all, Garfiel was supposed to be his greatest foe within the Sanctuary. The last time around, after rejecting Subaru's declaration that he would challenge the Trial, he was the one had who incarcerated Subaru before training fang and claw on Ram, Otto,

and the people of Earlham Village who had helped him try to escape.

He hadn't forgotten the anger he felt. It had been unforgivable. This was his mortal enemy who he needed to defeat.

That was why Subaru had no idea why Garfiel was doing his best to save Subaru…

"Garfiel, don't you…?"

"Don't make me repeat myself. Can't ya see the situation we're in? Who gives a damn about our differences? Right now, what's important is figuring out how to tear out that thing's neck. Nothin' else matters."

When Subaru pressed the point, Garfiel brushed his idle concern aside with a quiet comment. His tone had been calm, but that's exactly what instilled Subaru with the greatest fear he had felt that day. It was then that he belatedly realized the fire blazing in Garfiel's jade eyes…

*Rage, indignation, fury*—the intensity in those eyes immediately brought those words to mind.

As Garfiel nursed those emotions, Subaru finally found the words to ask the question he ought to have brought up earlier.

"—Garfiel. What happened to Ram and the others?"

"

Below where they stood, the ominously undulating shadow continued its encroachment upon the Sanctuary. Stunned to see the treetops of the forest steadily sinking, Subaru forgot to breathe.

Everything was being engulfed by the pitch-black body. What happened to everything that was swallowed by that darkness? The hope that the people inside were only unconscious was dashed the moment he took a good hard look.

Subaru could only imagine that the chances of finding survivors inside the shadow were despairingly bad.

"Wh-what the hell's going on…? How could…at a time like this?"

—The Bowel Hunter, the Beast Master, the Great Rabbit…and Garfiel.

Subaru had come flying out of the tomb ready to defy any disaster that threatened to befall him. After obtaining Echidna's cooperation, he had hardened his resolve to face and overcome any obstacle that stood in his way.

…Naturally, he had decided all that completely unaware of the incomprehensible entity before him now.

"Why here, why now…?!"

Subaru glared at the center of the swirling shadow that was devoid of rhyme or reason. He screamed with everything he had.

"Tell me why the hell you're here—Witch of Jealousy!!"

His ears had heard the name over and over. He'd felt the being's existence countless times before.

The stories handed down for generations named her as the worst of all calamities. She was the one responsible for Subaru's suffering. She was the root of all evil—the shadow that had engulfed Emilia and the others was none other than the Witch of Jealousy.

"Think. Thinkthinkthink. If I don't do something, figure something out and—and—and defeat it somehow…"

Pounding his dull-feeling head, Subaru desperately searched for a path to victory. He had to drive back the shadow and retake the Sanctuary now enveloped by darkness. *What for? You've already lost Emilia and the others in this world.*

"—Ah."

Subaru, slammed by the internal thought, made a slight sound in his throat.

In contrast to Subaru's roiling emotions, his inner voice had

delivered an exceptionally cold-blooded judgment. It was mocking him for stubbornly clinging to a doomed world that had already gone past the point of no return and demanding that he take logical, decisive action.

*What would we do even if we did manage to overcome this? There's no way to go on. Not in a world like this.*

"…Bastard. Tryin' to say there's no point in comin' after me?"

"Wha…?"

With one murmur from Garfiel, Subaru's deep introspective thoughts vanished. Not bothering with the young boy right beside him, Garfiel turned his sharp, jade-colored eyes toward the shadow.

"Scratch that. This bastard isn't even looking this way! After doin' all this, now ya head outside and ignore me, huh?!"

Garfiel roared, practically spitting blood at the humiliation. But the shadow paid him no mind. Like he had said, it was already attempting to leave the Sanctuary, exiting the forest.

After displaying such obsession earlier, the shadow suddenly wasn't even acknowledging Subaru's existence as it proceeded out of the Sanctuary. Unable to discern what the true intent might be, Subaru was left confused—then he shuddered, as if struck by a thunderbolt.

A sudden flash of inspiration came to him without a single factual basis. And yet, he knew there could be no mistake. He could declare with absolute certainty that…

"—To the mansion."

"Ah?"

"The mansion! That Witch, she's trying to head for Roswaal's mansion!"

The memory of the Witch's whispers of love as well as how that it had intruded upon his thoughts even as it violated his mind and soul all came roaring back.

The goal hadn't been to love Subaru. The purpose was to dive deep inside of Subaru in search of everything that he cared about, to understand those things.

The ultimate goal was to rob the world of everything Subaru might turn his love toward, monopolizing his affections.

"As if I'd let you do whatever you want… We gotta—we've gotta stop her…!"

*Stop her how?* asked the cold, whispering inner voice, but he stubbornly flung it aside.

*Stop her how? Figure out a plan; then just stop her, obviously.*

He had to find a way to strike down that Witch. It wasn't pointless. There had to be some meaning in trying to stop her.

"Garfiel! Can't you attack her?! Slow her down somehow?!"

"Now the idiot asks… Stop runnin' your damned mouth! Me, I've been slammin' every attack I could think of into that thing for ages! Nothin' gets through that shadow dress. Doesn't even leave a scratch!"

"If Garfiel can't…"

Even what seemed like a surprise attack hadn't inflicted any damage to the Witch.

If even Garfiel's mighty blows had no effect, it was very possible that the shadow dress nullified physical attacks. If that was the case, only magic would work. And the top contender for that was—

"I'll tell ya right now, there ain't a single reason to look for that damn Roswaal. The only ones left in this forest are me 'n' that legendary lady Witch."

"Even Roswaal?! You're sure?!"

"The old hag's house and the Cathedral are both gone, down to the last brick. Can't rely on the loon. It's just us."

Even if he was far from full health, Roswaal was unmistakably a powerful man. Unfortunately, Garfiel curtly cut down the optimistic image Subaru had in mind.

If they couldn't even rely on Roswaal's aid, the overwhelming power required to win simply didn't seem to exist.

This was the worst Witch, the one who killed even the other Witches of the Deadly Sins and swallowed half the world.

"Can't we…do anything? At this rate, even the mansion is gonna get…"

Everything would be engulfed, stolen by that shadow, mercilessly trampled.

Was there something, anything, Subaru could do besides despair—?

"—Wait."

Watching the Witch grow distant, Subaru had the odd sense that something was wrong.

Was there really no way to stop her? Was there well and truly no move that might come to mind? *Think, remember, consider, recall. Find the one thing that only applies in this particular place—*

“—There’s the barrier.”

“…What?”

“The barrier! The Witch of Jealousy has to fulfill the conditions to pass through the barrier covering the Sanctuary! The tomb’s Trial hasn’t been cleared and she’s a half-elf!”

It was said that Satella, the Witch of Jealousy, was a silver-haired half-elf.

This fact had caused Emilia to endure irrational discrimination from a great deal of people. At the same time, it was the stories about those notorious features passed down from four centuries ago that made him certain the Witch of Jealousy would be bound by that forest.

That said, if the Witch turned out to be something like a vestigial mind with no physical body, things might not go the way he hoped—

“—No need to worry ’bout that.”

The certainty behind the murmur made Subaru raise his eyebrows. After seeing his reaction, Garfiel clicked his fangs together.

“The Witch has a physical body. Right now it’s just like the root of Balgren’s left wing, ain’t it?”

“…You mean, like, it’s a weak point?”

“Ain’t got no other meanin’! Yeah, yeah, yeah, I got it now!”

Slapping Subaru’s shoulder as if praising him for his insight, Garfiel smiled ferociously and carried on.

“She’ll be beggin’ under that disgusting veil when I finally tear her head off!!”

## 2

The Witch of Jealousy brazenly advanced straight toward the boundary of the Sanctuary, dragging shadow behind her.

Chasing after that vast body of shadow, Subaru—or rather, Garfiel carrying Subaru—set out, traversing the treetops and circling around the Witch’s path.

“Don’t know how much effect the barrier’ll have, but if she weakens even a little…”

Garfiel’s claws would have an opening. If that was the case, even the Witch of Jealousy would not escape unscathed.

Subaru was confident because he had personally experienced

what it was like to face Garfiel when he was in his beast form. He needed no explanation to know that a single blow from the bestial Garfiel contained overwhelming raw power.

The only other thing they needed was a way to guarantee the two would clash. And for that—

"Garfiel, she's drawn to me. So…"

"Hey, if you're tellin' me to use ya as a decoy, I'll bite your fingers off one by one."

Leaping through the forest from branch to branch, Garfiel chewed out Subaru over his proposal. Faced with his standoffish attitude, Subaru was daunted for a moment; then he lobbed an angry retort.

"I'm not sayin' this as some kind of joke! Barrier and decoy! They'll make our chances better, even if only a bit! Isn't that right?!"

"Oh, shaddap. If you're gonna be that ignorant, I'll throw ya overboard right now."

"—!! You should know already! About the miasma coming from my body that attracts it…"

Irritated by Garfiel's stubborn attitude, Subaru brought up the miasma swirling around him on his own. Surely Garfiel could not refute an argument made on that basis. However…

"The old hag! And Ram! And everyone else… They all got swallowed up right before my eyes…!"

"—!"

"Like I'm gonna live with the shame of lettin' even a bastard like you join 'em! The scars of Pararagurara never fade! No way, no way in hell I'd accept that! These scars'll be carved on the Witch's heart!!"

Eyes bloodshot, Garfiel vented his raging emotions as he adamantly pushed away Subaru's plan.

Garfiel's anger stemmed from stubbornness—the pointless kind, at that.

Subaru understood why the inner voice of his cold, callous side spat out that Garfiel's insistence was worthless. But the rest of Subaru couldn't laugh at him at all.

After all, unlike Subaru, who had arrived late to the scene, Garfiel had witnessed the horrors with his own eyes.

Watching Ram, Ryuzu, and all the other people he cared about get swallowed whole, vanishing within the shadow.

But even after so many precious people were stolen from him, Garfiel refused to use revenge as an excuse to throw all decency aside. He wouldn't tolerate any talk about a victory that involved sacrificing Subaru.

If this was indeed the rationality and conviction at Garfiel's core that guided his actions—

"Then how could he be capable of doing that to everyone—?"

How had he ended up killing the brave villagers and Otto when he shielded Subaru in such a cruel manner?

When he, too, knew full well the pain of losing something precious, the sadness of loss…

"We're here."

With no answer to that question forthcoming, the pair arrived at their destination.

They had chosen a tiny open space within the forest as the site of the decisive battle. The forest had been clear-cut there, leaving the waning moon and the stars overhead as the only audience to witness the Witch of Jealousy's return to the stage.

Behind them was the barrier; ahead of them, Subaru sensed the wriggling shadow drawing closer. The Witch was headed straight toward them. All that remained was to counterattack—but there was a simple problem with that.

"Garfiel, what are you gonna do? The barrier affects you the same way, right?"

Half-bloods—mixed-blood demi-humans—could not go past the forest's barrier. That applied to both Garfiel and the Witch. If he was weakened, it wouldn't matter how much power the Witch lost.

In response, Garfiel took something out of his loincloth. And that something was—

"…A crystal? That's yours?"

"I don't owe ya an explanation. Just shut up and watch. Gonna put this early risin' Witch back to sleep so fast that we won't need decoys or anythin' else."

The crystal glimmered blue—a glimmer he had laid eyes upon several times amid the twists and turns surrounding the Sanctuary.

He knew that Garfiel possessed one identical to the one Frederica owned. In earlier laps he had been through in the current time loop, Subaru had seen those crystals change hands several times over. Even now, he still didn't know the finer details surrounding the items, but—

“—! Who’s there?!”

The faint sound of footfalls landing on grass made Subaru instantly turn around. It was not the Witch. The direction and the mental pressure were far too different to be her. However, that alone wasn’t a reason to lower his guard.

“…Huh?”

And yet, the instant he set eyes upon the newcomer, Subaru’s caution was blotted out by shock.

“

There was no way Subaru could call it a sight for sore eyes. It was like something straight out of a nightmare.

“Didn’t wanna show ya this if I didn’t have to.”

Unlike Subaru’s obvious astonishment, Garfiel reacted with only a slightly bitter comment, showing no sign that he was amazed. This wasn’t something worth gaping over for him. As Subaru slowly overcame his initial surprise, a realization dawned on him: He had probably met one of the people in this group face-to-face already.

“…The moment we got here, I was teleported to the forest out of the blue…”

It had occurred right after the magical relocation Subaru experienced upon arriving at the Sanctuary.

The crystal had reacted to the barrier, and the power of the stone had sent Subaru flying into the woods. It must have been one of the perfect copies of Ryuzu that had led the stranded Subaru to the tomb. Once he reunited with Emilia, Otto, and the others, Ram had admonished him to conceal the fact that he had encountered the elven girl.

Until that very moment, Subaru had shoved the girl into a corner of his memory. However, given this unexpected reunion, he understood for the first time that it had been a mistake to overlook that first encounter.

As the doll-like girl—no, girls—stood in silence, it was evident that they were identical beings.

“Don’t tell me these are…clones? Copies…? Is that even possible…?”

Seeing the girls easily evoked those words in the back of Subaru’s brain.

They were terms deeply associated with stories that had science-fictional themes, but they were a poor fit for his new world, a place dominated by swords and spells. In the first place, who could have reproduced that kind of technology—?

“—Sorry to interrupt ya thoughts, but it’s time.”

Giving the confused Subaru a shove on the shoulder, Garfiel reoriented himself toward the forest. The impending pressure was making the hair on Subaru’s back stand up as he glanced back and forth between the forest and the girls.

“Garfiel! Don’t tell me your plan is—”

“Crush her with numbers. Reid always fights head-on, y’know!”

Bringing both fists together in front of his chest, Garfiel revealed that his plan followed the doctrine of “simple is best.” There was no hidden twist, but there was no argument that it wasn’t the most suitable choice. Of course, it was an operation that accepted there would be casualties.

“Don’t get bent out o’ shape worryin’ over them. They ain’t like the old hag. This lot is totally empty on the inside. Still, they should be able to follow orders, no problem. We’ll make an openin’ and take that bastard’s damn head!”

There was no time to lodge any complaint about the operation nor to ask the girls—the copies—what they thought.

“…As for you, lemme say sorry in advance.”

That was all Garfiel said in the final moments before Subaru was thrust into the heart of a new battlefield.

Not comprehending the meaning of the words, the powerless Subaru was relegated to the rear. Garfiel stood at the head of the formation with the twenty-odd copies lined up behind him while Subaru brought up the rear.

With their formation decided, an eerie moment of tranquility settled into place, filled only with his breathing and the beating of his heart.

Slowly, the menace showed itself as it trespassed upon the world.

The forest was being slain before his eyes. Swallowed by a shadow of immense mass, the trees lost their shape like something dissolving into water, leaving no trace behind as the very concepts of *tree* and *forest* were contaminated by *shadow*.

This was heresy. This was violation. This was a slaughter.

The Witch blotting out the world with her love noticed Subaru standing in the path of her advance.

And then—

“—I love you.”

Subaru was beset by an unending revulsion; his instincts kept clamorously ringing an alarm bell to shout *Danger!* After uttering that lone phrase, the Witch leaped over Garfiel and the Ryuzu brigade, whispering her love to no one but Subaru.

In that instant, the Witch directed all her interest and concern onto Subaru and Subaru alone—

“—Gaaaaaaa!!”

Garfiel, who was their only hope for victory, raised a great howl.

A moment later, the ground exploded. Kicking up plumes of dust, Garfiel leaped up like he had been launched from a slingshot.

Garfiel's mouth was open wide, fangs bared as he hurtled toward the shadow. As Subaru watched, he saw Garfield's entire body swell up as his clothing ripped from the inside, unable to endure the expansion of his flesh. His entire body became covered in golden fur, and his hands and feet transformed into bestial claws —Garfiel the great tiger, the ferocious beast Subaru was hard-pressed to forgive, had reared his head.

"—!!"

Roaring as he went, the savage tiger's speed exceeded all normal bounds.

Given how his beastly movements were unchanged, it was apparent that Garfiel had nullified the effect of the barrier somehow. Accordingly, with neither hesitation nor sorrow, he brought his fangs down to bite into the pitch-black dress and rip it apa—

"

them in the abdomen and hoisting them aloft.

Two girls with identical faces, impaled through their abdomens, were lined up at the same height as Garfiel, his four limbs still bound. The shadow swayed their bodies back and forth as if to mock him.

It was excessively vicious. However, the Witch's overconfidence had caused her to make a mistake.

There was barely any warning before the change occurred—but it was the change itself that was grand and terrible.

"Wha—?!"

The two impaled Ryuzus began emitting a pale light, and a second later, scattered in every direction like an explosion.

Their battered bodies transformed into particles of light, blowing away the shadow surrounding them. For a single moment, this breathed life back into the world steeped in shadowy darkness and started a chain reaction.

Following the two who had been blown away, the remaining copies shouted at the Witch all at once, launching a suicide charge against her.

It had already been demonstrated that an all-out charge with no thought for survival would prove effective. In response, the Witch didn't hesitate to direct all her shadows to meet the girls rushing at her.

The shadows welled up, dividing into groups to crush the girls trying to overwhelm the Witch with sheer numbers. There were five razor-edged shadows for each of the girls, a mass of about one hundred raging limbs dancing madly as they fell upon the girls who tried to take evasive action.

The shadows impaled and rent skulls and bodies alike as they sliced the girls to death.

Leaping all at the same moment, the remaining copies launched a simultaneous attack from numerous directions. Now that their little schemes had all been defeated by brute force, the Ryuzus used their last option, transforming into pale light and exploding one after another in a staggered, rhythmical fashion—which temporarily thinned the shadows spawned by the Witch, prying clear a path to the pitch-black dress behind. That was when—

"—Rrrrrrraaaa!!"

The fierce beast that had been riddled with wounds flew into the gap that had been wrenched open.

Escaping the shadow bindings during the replica suicide attack, the ferocious beast crouched low to the ground, and immediately following the pale blue explosions of light, a roar seemed to break through that dazzling glow as the claws of a wild animal swung at the Witch.

“

of flesh that were once Garfiel were mercilessly scattered about the murky black ground. Even these were swallowed by shadow, all traces of his existence erased. The Ryuzu replicas had also been annihilated, so only Subaru and the Witch remained—no, that wasn't right.

"—I love you."

From the beginning, the Witch had no eyes for anyone but Subaru, rooted to where he stood.

Not Garfiel, slashed to death; not the Ryuzu replicas, slaughtered; not the people of the Sanctuary and Earlham Village, no doubt engulfed by shadow at a time unbeknownst to him; not Ram; not Otto; not Ryuzu; not Roswaal; not Patlash; not Emilia—anything and everything else was a distant afterthought.

"—I love you."

"Shut up."

"I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you."

"I said, shut up…!"

As Subaru stood still, the Witch walked along a path formed of shadow, moving past the clearing to approach him.

Her contours were hazy. He couldn't even put a finger on her height. Just as before, he could not distinguish her voice.

And yet, her clingy zeal alone touched Subaru's heart without reservation to an abominable extent.

"I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you."

To the immobile Subaru, the Witch whispered her love as it if was a curse.

She acted more out of place and was worse at reading people than even Subaru. Not only did her whispers of love inspire anger in him, the adoration she was offered was completely selfish.

Her love was repulsive. But in that moment, what sent Subaru into even more of a rage was—

"I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you —Subaru."

"—You don't get to call me that!!"

That sweet, enchanted form of address made Subaru explode in anger.

The charming voice, the sweet gesture, the feverish way in which she said it rubbed Subaru the worst way possible.

“Who gave you permission to call me that name?! Don’t screw with me! God damn it!!”

It was a form of address filled with trust, with pride, with mutual love meant for those who stood at each other’s side.

In that world, there was only one person Subaru permitted to address him by his first name imbued with such affection.

“This ain’t a joke!! That’s for one person alone. Who the hell would…? No! Letting you go for what you’ve done, forgiving even one lock of your hair or one part of a single cell of yours, is too good for you—!!”

Indignant, Subaru let his anger reign, mercilessly driving home the maelstrom of emotions swirling inside his chest.

He had no chance of victory. He had no chance of survival. Besides, that world held no reason for him to live on anymore.

Even so, he absolutely could not simply stand and watch her trample on *that* bond as she pleased.

“I love you I love you I love you I love you.”

Her love was relentless. That was why Subaru absolutely refused to respond to that love.

“In this world, when I heard ‘I love you’ spoken seriously to me for the first time…it gave me, an unredeemable bastard, enough power to make me think I could become a hero.”

He was a piece of garbage, twisted down, broken, and ready to flee from everything, but those words had made him believe he could face the future head-on, never giving in—to challenge it once more, over and over, however many times that it took.

Compared to that, the substance of the Witch’s love was insultingly weak.

“I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you.”

“The number one and number two spots in my heart ain’t changin’. There’s no place in there for the likes of you.”

She started it; he finished it—Subaru’s visage contorted vilely as he flatly enumerated those he loved.

“So I’ll roll up your love and toss it aside. And if I’ve gotta compare…”

He had no way to mount a physical attack. But he still had verbal attacks. Getting on other people’s nerves was a particular specialty of his.

What could he say, what should he say, that would rub the

Witch the worst way? There was no one better armed to get under someone else's skin than Subaru. So he knew.

Accordingly, Subaru gave a shallow, cruel laugh, turning a look of scorn toward the Witch.

"—I'd rather love Echidna and the other Witches than *you*."

"

beyond the whispers of love. —No, he did not sense them, for they were not separate at all. It was Subaru. It was Subaru Natsuki. If he was dissolved, mixed, and combined with one mass, there would be no boundary between him and others. Everything that had been swallowed would become Subaru Natsuki.

There was warmth, sadness, hatred, generosity, dejection, ecstasy, despair, relief, lamentation, satisfaction.

Yes, there was satisfaction. Amid the many despairs and many laments, there was satisfaction.

That satisfaction was a part of Subaru. If that could fill Subaru, then—

"—?"

He reached a hand out toward the satisfaction—no, it was not a hand. He had no body to be found—no, that was not so. His body had been swallowed by shadow, so it was all there: his dissolved heart, his crumbling consciousness, the remains of Subaru Natsuki's soul. There they were all gathered together. And in gathering them, he comprehended the reason why they were gathered.

There was heat. Subaru Natsuki felt heat in the midst of his return. And so to a place completely different than that false satisfaction, he extended an arm, a right arm, a right wrist. And then—

—in that darkness-colored world, a prayer-imbued handkerchief glimmered vividly.

## 5

His consciousness floated upward.

As if in struggling to reach the water's surface in search of oxygen, he frantically clawed against the darkness, desperately moving higher, higher.

His consciousness was enshrouded in darkness. It was as if he had sunk into a swamp. His mind was immersed in weight and weariness, yet Subaru earnestly pressed on even so—

At the end of his struggling, his field of vision suddenly opened. Subaru's mind had floated back up to the real world.

He had returned from the world of shadow alive—but that did not mean he had escaped peril by any stretch.

"*Hagh…! Haa*…ah?

His breathing was clumsy. There was some kind of shadow stuffed in his throat. His feet were not on the ground. Bound by shadow, his body was being held aloft at an angle. He could not move. He was not being allowed to move.

But as if clinging to it, he touched the handkerchief wrapped around his right wrist with his left hand.

"…Petra's handkerchief."

In that world covered by shadow, Subaru's field of vision was dyed the color of darkness. Amid that pitch-blackness, Petra's handkerchief alone dazzled, radiating a white light as if trying to drive off the dark.

The feelings with which Petra's handkerchief was imbued had granted this miracle to Subaru—no, such a thought was hard to justify. Subaru had a different culprit in mind for the crafty trick that had saved him.

—Namely, the Witch of Greed who had touched that handkerchief upon the occasion of his departure, leaving words of deep import with him.

"That damn Echidna… Did she know this would happen, damn it…?"

*It's insurance. Just to be safe*, he could almost hear the Witch's face say as it floated up in the back of his mind. That one time, he was well and truly grateful for that inconsiderate, boastful Witch.

If not for that light, Subaru would surely have been engulfed by the shadow, vanishing without a trace.

What was happening inside that shadow? —It was a blender. The shadow was dissolving Subaru's very being. It was melting him and mixing him into something else: everything that had been swallowed by shadow.

—Mixed with all the many, many things that had been swallowed whole by the Witch's shadow.

Becoming one with those who had been melted before him had exposed Subaru to a great many emotions. Coursing into him were sensations, feelings, memories, knowledge that was not his own. It became natural to be instantly aware of those things as they let themselves in, carving into his body, his mind, and his soul.

He'd escaped by a hair's breadth. He'd escaped with his life with only fractions of a second to spare. Being engulfed by that shadow was not death. Subaru Natsuki would be stirred into something else, erased through becoming part of a heterogeneous

whole.

That was an intolerable defeat, one from which even Return by Death could not bring him back.

Had it not been for Echidna's aid, Subaru would have come to an end, unable to slip out of the shadow's embrace. It was because he could feel that in his bones that he wanted to call the Witch right back to thank her.

"Guu…agh…"

But delaying the inevitable with Echidna's aid had gone as far as it could.

Slowly, Subaru's body was being engulfed by the shadow once more. As if his lower body was sinking into the ground, as if his extremities were being meticulously digested bit by bit, the Witch's shadow was consuming Subaru.

He was gradually losing himself. Not only was the sense of loss frightening but the relief.

There was relief. There was joy that he would be swallowed, dissipated, and erased, his fate arriving at its end.

Accordingly, he was certain in his belief. He could not die from being engulfed by shadow. He would continue to be "loved"—forever.

"Damn…it all…"

The light created by the Witch had bought him tens of seconds, but that postponement would not save Subaru's life.

It was only a brief matter of time until he was pulled in and erased. Just what did Echidna want there?

"That…shitty Witch…!"

The instant he arrived at his conclusion, Subaru cast aside his gratitude from the moment just prior, tearing at the light with his left hand.

The single saving grace was the light that had saved Subaru, brushing aside the shadow engulfing him—and it was here that Echidna's desire rested.

Echidna had a goal. Echidna had left in Subaru's hands the means to accomplish it.

It was a lifeline. A lifeline not for saving Subaru but to let him take his own life.

"

She had no doubt thought it would be difficult to accomplish with nothing but a single handkerchief. Her polite consideration brought tears to his eyes.

It was just, though they were tears, what coursed out were tears of blood.

He closed his eyes, let out his breath—and with that impetus, he thrust the dagger of light toward his own throat.

*"—gh."*

Though the sharpness of the blade of light was unclear, it penetrated his windpipe with ease. Blood coursed backward into the fatal wound, and as it flowed from his throat down to his lungs, his consciousness began to drown.

—The protective charm of light was not a weapon. Echidna had put it in his hands so that he could take his own life.

That was what the postponement of tens of seconds was for, so that he might realize, so that he might carry it out, so that he might Return by Death.

Echidna had most likely anticipated that the Witch of Jealousy would appear outside of the tomb. The reason why remained unclear to Subaru, but he had to pay for it with his life.

"—!"

For the first time, Subaru's suicide caused the Witch of Jealousy to shout something other than her love.

However, drowning in his own blood, already having let go of his consciousness, Subaru did not comprehend the words.

But he stretched his hand toward the face of the Witch covered in shadow as if it was the natural thing to do. It seemed right.

The dagger of light fell away, and the fingers of the final vestiges of light touched the shadowy veil.

The veil came apart, and the half of the Witch's face hidden by the shadow was exposed to him.

She had purple eyes that were like gemstones. She had shimmering silver hair that was like moonlight. And she had a lovely and familiar face—

Seeing that face twisted in grief, he felt not so much surprise as pain within his chest. Sadness had impaled his chest.

With his throat filled with blood, he could not form proper words.

Nonetheless, to the one before his eyes, the sad girl who spilled countless tears, he made a declaration…

“I will—”

*—I will save you.*

The instant he stated it, Subaru Natsuki lost his life.

## 6

When he straddled “death,” the first piece of reality to arrive was the bitter taste of dust.

*“—U-geh!”*

Coughing violently, he spat out foreign substances tasting of dirt along with his saliva. After that, Subaru sat up and confirmed that he had been lying on a floor in a cold, dark room.

The stone walls were very faintly glowing blue, and it was tranquil enough to rattle your nerves—he was inside the tomb.

“I’ve re…turned…”

With a raspy voice, opening and closing his hands right before his eyes, Subaru made the result of Return by Death sink in.

His memory from just before was still fresh, both from having been swallowed by shadow and having ended his own life. —So, too, the violent pain in his throat.

“Not the first time I’ve killed myself, is it…?”

The sharp sensation boring into his throat, the feeling of it being gouged out—this made Subaru breathe hard.

There was the suffering of drowning in his own blood and the sense of loss from his consciousness slipping away. No matter how many times he’d tasted death, the horror never dulled. No matter how many times or instances he felt death, it never got easier.

He was afraid of death. Death was terrifying. It was painful, agonizing, yet even so—

“Even so, coming back…beats the hell out of ending with everything lost…!”

He’d chosen to come back. In that place, he’d chosen death without hesitation.

This way, Subaru could still fight. He could resist. He could fight to win his future.

“But I can’t get all mushy about death all the same… I still have things I have to do.”

Gazing anew at those things he had to do, Subaru tried to calm the sound of his heart as he checked around. Having returned to the tomb, there was a silver-haired girl lying right at Subaru's side.

This was the tomb, the starting point of Return by Death—where Emilia was continuing her nightmare about her past.

He had to shake her slender shoulder and awaken her from that nightmare. Tell her she didn't have to go through those terrible thoughts anymore, gently embrace her—those were the first things Subaru ought to do.

Hence, as Emilia gasped in anguish, Subaru gently stretched a hand out toward her—

"…The hell?"

There was a tiny tremble in his fingers as he tried to touch Emilia with them.

Wondering what was up, he tried to stop the shaking in his fingers. However, though Subaru was aware of the trembling, his fingertips disregarded his will; if anything, the trembling increased. And that was not all.

A strange clattering sound was echoing off the stone walls. The annoying sound and the trembling fingers left Subaru confused as to what in the world was going on, but belatedly he realized.

The clattering was coming from Subaru's teeth. Without his teeth pressed together, his jaw was trembling, causing the miserable rattling.

It was as if Subaru was hesitating out of cowardice. His fingers continued to tremble, and his teeth kept clacking.

—The cause behind that trembling was the face he had seen on the other side of that shadowy veil.

"Why am I shaking…? Don't tell me I'm afraid of…"

He had seen the Witch's face in the moment just prior to Return by Death—and it was the same face as Emilia's. After straddling death to come back, he had dragged along a fear of the Witch that stuck with him.

Enough fear to make his soul forget a very basic thing… Emilia was *not* the Witch of Jealousy.

"A stupid trick like that… Come on, I know better than that, damn it…!"

Subaru didn't know what had brought on the sudden revival play. However, he did have an idea of why the Witch had taken that form. There was one possibility he could think of.

The Witch had probably manifested in the Sanctuary through taking possession of Emilia's body.

Petelgeuse, an Archbishop of the Seven Deadly Sins, had been an evil spirit able to possess the bodies of others. Knowing of that madman, Subaru could easily accept the possibility that the Witch could take over other people's bodies as well.

What had convinced him the most was that it perfectly explained everything Garfiel's demeanor had implied.

For the plan to use the barrier, Garfiel had been absolutely certain the Witch had a physical body. Subaru's memory was also fresh that he had said he was "sorry in advance" just prior to the decisive battle against the Witch.

In other words, Garfiel had seen the Witch possess Emilia. That was why he hadn't given a clear answer as to whether Emilia was dead or alive and why he'd apologized to Subaru for striking down both the Witch and Emilia-turned-avatar.

It added up. It explained everything. That was it. Wasn't it nothing more than that? It had nothing to do with Emilia. It wasn't any knock against her. There was no reason to be afraid of—

*—Quit it with the bald-faced lying*, his inner self coldly spat.

*Bald-faced lying.* His inner self's words made Subaru aware that he was deceiving himself. He was not afraid of Emilia. That was the truth. But that was one thing. His fear of the Witch was in another dimension.

"

If Emilia opened her eyes, smiling softly as she always did, all those things would become a needless worry.

But if that wish was not to be granted—

*“—Emi…lia.”*

Whether he sought to save her or sought to be saved himself, he no longer could tell even that.

But he thought that the fact that his voice called her name and the finger touching her cheek did not shake was miracle enough for him.

“

the verge of trembling, were now pursed with a strong will. To a surprised Subaru, Emilia proceeded to gently reach out with her hand as she spoke.

"Why do you have such a pained look on your face?"

*Hgh*, went the broken breath that trickled out of him.

Subaru was frozen in surprise as Emilia's finger gently stroked his cheek. Her white fingertip gently wiped the corner of his eye, pulling down the dam holding back the tears welling up, letting them fall freely.

There were tears. Only then did Subaru realize that he'd been on the verge of completely breaking down.

"Ah, uh, I?"

Once he realized the fact, it only took him a moment to crumble.

The tremors that hit him were in a totally different dimension from what had afflicted his fingers and teeth from moments before. The trembling robbed him of his body's internal strength, and Subaru, who had been on his knees, lost his balance, sinking onto his rear.

"It's all right, it's all *right*, Subaru. I'm here, I'm right here…"

As his crumpling body leaned forward, a delicate touch embraced him from the front.

Emilia's temperature was hot enough that he could feel it through the thin fabric of his clothing. A gentle beating came through the chest where he laid his head; he could tell that relief was filling the cracks of his broken heart.

Relief. —Yes, this was beyond all doubt relief: that Emilia had remained herself, that the Witch had not stolen her body away.

And pathetic as it was, Subaru's body had chosen quivering and crying as its way of expressing that relief.

"I'm so sorry, making you worry like that. It's all right, it's all right…"

As Subaru trembled and cowered, Emilia gently consoled him, calling out to him over and over as if pitying him.

Ever so quietly, Emilia continued to console Subaru in that fashion.

# CHAPTER 2

## I'VE ALREADY SEEN HELL

**1**

"So that is how Lady Emilia returned with Crybaby Barusu in tow…"

"Somehow, that sounds like the title of a fairy tale or something…"

Subaru had bawled his eyes out, and Emilia had consoled him. The time of warmth and being pathetic had come to an end.

When their legs brought them out of the tomb, Ram was there to greet them, and having listened to the circumstances, she made the aforementioned kind words. Unfortunately, Subaru, well aware of how pathetic he was, had no mental energy left with which to refute her.

"After having raced inside in such dramatic fashion, he faints just like he did during the day, causing trouble to the Lady Emilia he was supposed to save… Why are you alive exactly?"

"I said I have no mental energy; that's not a reason to come after me even more, you know?!"

"That's right, Ram. Subaru was worried about me. Those feelings are precious."

Ram, unable to conceal her scorn, emitted a heavy sigh as her shoulders fell. When Subaru lodged an objection about her demeanor, Emilia, completely recovered, offered him reassuring support.

Emilia stood at Subaru's side, angling her refined eyebrows in a dignified manner as she continued.

"Though given that he went out of his way to help me, it is *really* disappointing that he ended up collapsing all of a sudden and

broke down crying from worry after—”

“Emilia-tan? Emilia-tan? I’m going to cry all over again.”

“But—! Lately, Subaru’s done nothing but help me…so a part of me is relieved that Subaru showed me his weak side like that…”

Touching a hand to her chest, Emilia’s words caused Subaru to unwittingly catch his breath.

Emilia had an overinflated view of Subaru’s worth. Up to that point, Subaru had showed her his pathetic side on more than one occasion—this time was only the latest example in the long list of embarrassing moments since they had first met.

“I’m both happy and embarrassed to hear you say that, Emilia-tan, but I don’t really want to show you stuff like that much…”

“Eh, why not?”

“That’s because I always want to show Emilia-tan my cool side. I want you to forget that I’m really a weak, pathetic, totally unsalvageable guy.”

“Sheesh. I won’t hate you just because you show me a few moments of weakness, Subaru.”

Emilia put her hands on her hips, cheeks puffing up in indignation. Subaru tried his best to smile to gloss things over.

Emilia’s words were kind, but Subaru’s vanity didn’t let him gain any comfort from them. His displeasure was completely unrelated to Emilia’s personality and it certainly wasn’t because he was worried about disappointing her—this was simply Subaru’s stubbornness talking.

“Ha! Aren’t you full of yourself? Seeing you act this pigheaded makes it difficult to believe you are fresh from bawling your eyes out.”

“And there Big Sis goes pouring cold water on right when things were going nicely…”

“Now, now, do not say that, Mr. Natsuki. Miss Ram’s demeanor belies her concern. When she had no idea what was occurring inside, Miss Ram was particularly worried out of… *Hiii!*”

Otto looked quite pleased with himself, but one cross look from Ram instantly made it fade away. *No way she’s seriously acting sour because of an adorable reason like that*, thought Subaru as he squinted at Ram.

“What?”

“…No, ah, nothing at all.”

But her sharp glare made him beat a hasty retreat as well.

Unlike Otto, the damage to him was light because he was more accustomed to facing off against Ram. Either way, Ram and Otto had been there to warmly greet Subaru and Emilia upon their return. That being the case, the remaining issue became quite simple—

“

current Garfiel didn't seem to bear him any ill will. That, at least, was something to be welcomed.

"I was kinda worried if I'd stuck around you, you'd look down on me for my body odor…"

"The heck are ya…? Me, I really don't like bein' associated with body odor like that."

"—. Just take that as meaning it's an issue with my body, would you? More importantly, let's sit down somewhere before discuss all the fine details. Talking while we're standing like this isn't great, right?"

"That's true. Subaru must be tired from crying so much, after all…"

"Emilia-tan!"

Emilia agreed with Subaru's point of view while adding further fuel to the crybaby fire. She responded to Subaru's sorrowful voice by sticking out her tongue. "I'm sorry," she offered in a cutesy apology.

Forgiving her teasing because of how adorable she was, Subaru harbored a different set of thoughts within his chest.

—This time, unlike all prior runs, Emilia had not become terribly despondent due to failing the Trial.

The trigger for that change was the pathetic reality of Emilia recovering from panic faster than Subaru, but either way, this time she had confronted her past but still retained a strong heart.

It was not set in stone that her mental state would have a positive effect on the Trial going forward, but—

"It's worth giving it a shot, huh?"

"Mr. Natsuki? Is something the matter?"

"Nothin' really."

As the group started to change locations, Otto called out to Subaru when he began lagging behind. Responding with a shrug of his shoulders, Subaru quickly caught up to them.

Emilia's heart was still unbroken by the Trial and Garfiel remained neutral.

The circumstances surrounding the Sanctuary had shown him different faces upon every repetition. This time proved no exception, but Subaru was keenly aware how this was the most solid starting situation to date.

"After that, it comes down to what I try and what I get out of it, huh?"

*To hell with dying for nothing. I have to use death more effectively.*

All the death until that point had meaning to it…even the repeated deaths of the world and the Sanctuary.

Hence—

"Making it back from inside that shadow has gotta be worth something."

His head complained of slight pain. In a corner of his mind rested a lingering memory of being mixed with other people.

Surely something in there could provide some meaning to his death and that chance encounter with the Witch.

## 2

The party left the tomb, heading toward Ryuzu's residence, which served as a de facto inn.

Where the conversation passing between them in the guest room was concerned, there was no great change in the issues regarding the Trial. But unlike before, there was the exceptionally major difference that Emilia was participating in that conversation.

Up until the last run, Emilia had been wedged between her sense of duty and her fear toward her past, with the seemingly insurmountable weight causing her to waste away. But this time was different.

"I'm sorry about today. I made everyone worry, and I *really* caused trouble for Subaru…but I think it's plain to see that I have to do this."

Subaru could not tell what everyone thought of Emilia proclaiming her determination at the end of the meeting. But for his part, Subaru was proud of her, feeling a desire to applaud. In fact, he did.

On that note, the day's meeting came to a conclusion, adjourning so that people might prepare for the morrow.

"Emilia-tan, make sure you bundle up; take your time and rest, okay? If you don't feel sleepy anymore, I can stay by your bedside from 'good night' to 'good morning' but…"

"Mmm, I'm completely all right. You need a break as much as I do, don't you, Subaru? Noon and night makes twice you've collapsed in that tomb today, so…"

"Ahhh, I guess it does. Yeah, you're right. I'll take care, too."

As Subaru gave Emilia her send-off to bed, her observation

made him scratch his head and give off a vague smile.

Having accepted this change in Emilia, Subaru hadn't told anyone about him and the tomb—in other words, the fact that he had taken the Trial and overcome the first part.

This was out of consideration for Emilia, for if she knew Subaru had overcome the Trial she had failed, it would make her harbor unnecessary thoughts of self-reproach. If this time, Emilia could preserve a strong mental state, then the results of her second attempt might change as well. He remained hopeful.

And even if the result was the same, the knowledge of that was still something worth obtaining. There was value in trying.

—More importantly, this time Subaru wouldn't be overly focusing on clearing the tomb.

If he challenged the tomb, he could meet Echidna within the Trial once more. There was no mistake that this would be of aid to him, but at the moment, Subaru lacked the qualifications sufficient to meet her.

His preparations were insufficient. He was still lacking new information, new results, new everything—under these circumstances, even if he met Echidna, it would only amount to her indulging Subaru. He would rather avoid that if he could help it.

Accordingly, Subaru needed to accumulate something that was merited another meeting with the Witch. For that sake as well, Subaru's current top priority was proving that the "memories" resting inside of his head were not mistaken.

"Ram, I need to talk to you for a second. Is now good?"

"How indecent."

"You jump to bad-sounding conclusions *fast*!"

After parting with Emilia, Subaru addressed Ram as she tidied up the guest room.

Staying in the Ryuzu residence were Emilia and Roswaal, and Ram, who was tending to their needs, for three guests total. By rights, Subaru ought to have been spending the night with the people of Earlham Village in the Cathedral but—

"But today I have something that comes first. You remember the promise we discussed before challenging the tomb, right?"

"Of course. But I am surprised that you remembered, Barusu. You had quite a busy time in the tomb, I am sure."

Though she was obviously referring to him collapsing inside and crying his eyes out, Subaru kept his mouth shut about that. This

was after having been laughed at for the Crybaby Barusu incident aplenty. Right now, Subaru had more important things to talk about.

“Anyway, the promise…by which you mean Master Roswaal making time to speak with you, I take it…”

“Because of extenuating circumstances, I want to defer that promise until later. In exchange, Ram, I want a favor from you.”

“How indecent.”

“Don’t make this a running gag!!”

He sighed at the scowl Ram was giving him. He hadn’t gone as far as scrapping the promise completely, but from her demeanor, Ram didn’t think much of Subaru’s arbitrary request. Even so, she shrugged her shoulders.

“—Fine. Master Roswaal did tell me to put myself at Barusu’s disposal. And should this be some manner of vulgar scheme, it is Barusu who will regret it later.”

“Can I just point out that I’m not looking at you with indecent eyes or anything?!”

“I suppose not. What Barusu turns toward Ram is not a gaze of carnal desire but something vaguer.”

The sudden statement perplexed Subaru. However, he immediately realized what she was really getting at. And from Subaru’s perspective, it amounted to being sucker punched from a blind spot.

After all, Ram was asserting that Subaru was looking right through Ram and seeing “someone” else instead.

Even though he’d been trying his best to be careful and avoid this—

“What a pathetic face. It is not a repulsive gaze, though, so I won’t speak of it any further…”

Noticing that Subaru was unsettled made Ram narrow her eyes. This was not exasperation or scorn but an emotion of gloom so thin it was almost invisible to the eye. That made it stab at Subaru’s chest all the more.

Though their personalities differed greatly, that gentleness was commonly shared by the sisters who looked like two peas in a pod.

“

awaken. Subaru wanted to speak about the feelings, the memories he had for the two of them until he could speak no more.

—But Subaru knew of a world where this had led to Ram's attempt to sacrifice Rem. The despair and dejection of that moment kept Subaru from speaking of Rem.

A world where Ram abandoned Rem, where the elder sister abandoned the younger, would undoubtedly drive him mad.

"…You had something to ask of Ram?"

"Uh, er?"

"Please close your mouth and stop making that idiotic face. It was not my intention to make you feel bad, Barusu. Ram wishes to carry out Master Roswaal's instructions. To do that, all that is required is for me to listen to your story."

"That's a big help… Er, actually I wanted to ask a favor having to do with Garfiel."

Graciously going along with Ram's rare generosity, Subaru finally reached the main issue. The name he brought up as the topic made Ram narrow her eyes just a tad.

"Has something happened with Garf?"

"—. It's about what's gonna happen. The odds are pretty high that he's going to get in the way of my covert activities. If I could have you keep him occupied, I can—"

"Seize the opportunity and give his head a good *wham* from behind, yes?"

"Even if I did that, wouldn't it just end with me being sent packing? Geez…"

In fact, Garfiel's strength was so great that an ordinary person like Subaru wasn't even in the right dimension required to consider delivering a knockout blow. He'd already seen Garfiel fight three times during their initial encounter, later in his bestial state, and of course, the battle against the Witch, and that was plenty.

Even if Ram actually did charm him, the results of a fight would no doubt be the same. Ram seemed to agree with his assessment.

"While it is true that Garf is rather taken with me, but the one has nothing to do with the other. I assume you require no explanation for how absurdly strong he is."

"Yeah, if it came to violence, I'd go down in one blow."

"You would hardly be worth the time. How cheeky of Garf."

Ram's manner of speaking was belied by the gentleness in her

eyes whenever she spoke about Garfiel. It was impossible to tell precisely what emotions lay behind those pink eyes, and Subaru, failing to glean anything, abandoned the attempt.

Garfiel was an obstacle. He was a wall that needed to be climbed over. There was no room to see him as anything more than that. He'd determined Garfiel to be his foe. If Ram was the most appropriate means for overcoming him, he just needed to make her trust him.

"…There is a disagreeable look in your eyes, Barusu."

But when Subaru fell silent, Ram murmured as the temperature of her cruel gaze dipping.

"I do not know what you have seen on the way h— No, what you saw in the tomb, but it is unlikely to have been anything good. Compared to the gaze that clearly sees someone else when you look at me, this is far viler."

"…Quit it with the weird suspicions. All I did in the tomb was sleep. The dream I had wasn't all that bad."

The dream—his passing encounter with the white-haired Witch, Echidna, floated up into the back of his mind.

Having conversed with Echidna three times already, he wouldn't say he knew everything there was to know about the Witch, but her existence was a very big deal so far as Subaru was concerned.

Amid those precious few opportunities, his mind had been saved, he had obtained the strength to move forward, and she had even saved his life.

She was someone he could reveal Return by Death to, someone he could speak to about it—that alone was unspeakably precious.

"

those words and, not waiting for a reply, made his way out of the room.

When he left the building, the warm breeze filtering through the Sanctuary tickled Subaru's bangs. Smelling the scent of grass mixed in with the nighttime breeze, Subaru's legs slowly took him in the direction of the forest. The settlement's bonfire had already been extinguished, but thanks to the moonlight, his footsteps were steady.

After walking for a little while, he abruptly heard the sound of finger whistling coming from the direction of the Ryuzu residence.

"…Don't tell me that's her way of calling Garfiel over?"

Guessing that it was Ram doing whistling, he pictured Garfiel being called over by it in his mind. It made him think that the relationship between them was owner and pet and definitely not that of a man and a woman.

Either way, he was grateful for Ram keeping Garfiel occupied. At the moment, he had bigger worries and priorities than their relationship.

—To determine whether *it* was true, Subaru arrived at a path that was not a path and entered the heart of the forest.

## 3

Subaru breathed deeply to endure the powerful, throbbing pain of the memories.

Biting down on his back teeth, thick sweat came onto his brow as he forced open his field of vision, matching the scenery with the memories. He used his arms to part the overgrown vines and branches, advancing into the heart of thick green that even beasts disliked, heading deeper and deeper.

The throbbing memories he gained when he was swallowed by shadow, and his very being had been on the verge of dissolving into the murky water, he saw a ray of hope.

Murky water—that was the only thing he could call that situation. When his existence was whisked into the shadow, melting into the darkness, Subaru was merged with the numerous "consciousnesses" within. These were probably the minds of the victims who had been engulfed by the Witch's shadow. Subaru had managed to escape only moments before he would have shared their fate.

What followed was fruitlessly losing his life despite fighting his hardest, but Subaru's living or dying was not important. —Having touched upon the memories of others held in that shadow's embrace, the fact that he had returned with a part of those thoughts was crucial.

From a fragment cut off from the memories, he had deduced he'd been seeing things wrong, coming up with mistaken answers for important questions. This came via the vile practice of mixing with numerous other people, but even so, the return on investment was exceptionally large.

After all, he'd managed to come back with a great deal, even if it took one of Subaru's lives to fish it out.

"That leaves confirming what those memories say… The details kinda give me the willies, though."

With the scenery around him all the color of green, he just couldn't find the hidden facility inside the forest that was his destination—that hard-to-find white building that Subaru had unwittingly arrived at twice.

The first time was when he'd been incarcerated by Garfiel; the second time, he'd arrived at the place through a teleport via the crystal's power. Subaru did not know the truth behind the building. But the memories were urging him onward.

They kept urging that this was one of the Sanctuary's secrets, and believing in this, Subaru continued walking until—

"—Found you."

In the depths of the forest, Subaru spotted the weathered white structure. He wiped the sweat off his brow.

The building, standing quietly amid the deep green, had an air about it that seemed to reject the entry of people—no, it was not people alone whose entry it rejected. It was animals, insects… everything.

The proof of this was the strange odor prickling Subaru's nose the instant he spotted the building.

"Ughh…this scent's still going strong, too, huh?"

Wiping his lips with his sleeve, he didn't think anyone would enter that structure without a very good reason.

"But I'm going in… Can't get a tiger's cub without going into a tiger's den and all."

Slowly, carefully, Subaru approached the building's entrance. The stonework building was fairly weathered, but just like the

tomb, there seemed to be no need to worry about it collapsing. Seeing that there was no door, leaving him free to enter and exit through the entrance, he confirmed that there was no sign of human presence as he began his infiltration.

It was fairly dark inside the building, but moonlight filtered in through cracks in the ceiling. Relying upon this to ensure he could still see, Subaru scrupulously inspected the floor and walls as he headed deeper inside.

Subaru had been to that place twice before, once through confinement and once through teleportation, but neither occasion permitted him any leeway to scrutinize the structure, so he'd put studying the place on the back burner. He had come to regret putting many things on the back burner in that fashion. This, too, he now had cause to mourn, but—

"This cavity in the wall… This is from the memory… *Gii?!*"

Sparks scattered across the backs of Subaru's eyelids, his eyes becoming teary as he became certain that this and the memories matched together.

As he looked around the facility, there was a room in the farthest reaches that was twice as large as any along the way. This was the room in which Subaru had been held during his captivity. The back wall of the room maintained an unnatural whiteness, as if it had been bleached, and it was here he discovered a strange cavity. The cavity had clearly been purposefully created, and when he timidly peered closer, Subaru thought it looked like a place where you'd hide something.

—No, he did not "think" it. The memories knew. This was where the crystal had been placed.

"Placed but why?"

He took out of his pocket the blue crystal that Frederica had possessed. Having been teleported by it twice over, Subaru handled the stone with great care as he placed it within the cavity.

*Maybe something will happen or maybe nothing will happen*—but the instant after he had the thought…

"—?!!"

The instant the crystal left his hand, light gushed from it. The dazzling blue made Subaru's breath catch as he instantly shielded his face with his arm. Then he slowly squinted toward the light, and…

"…Oh come *on*."

He unwittingly let his voice trickle out. The blue light generated from the center of the cavity gradually waned. In the place the light vanished from was— No, rather, the issue was what wasn't: the white wall that ought to have been there.

The wall with the cavity vanished, and so came to be an entrance to another room hidden behind it. Then, when Subaru looked at what was in the hidden room, he was at a loss for words.

At the center of the room was enshrined a huge crystal large enough to just wrap his arms around it.

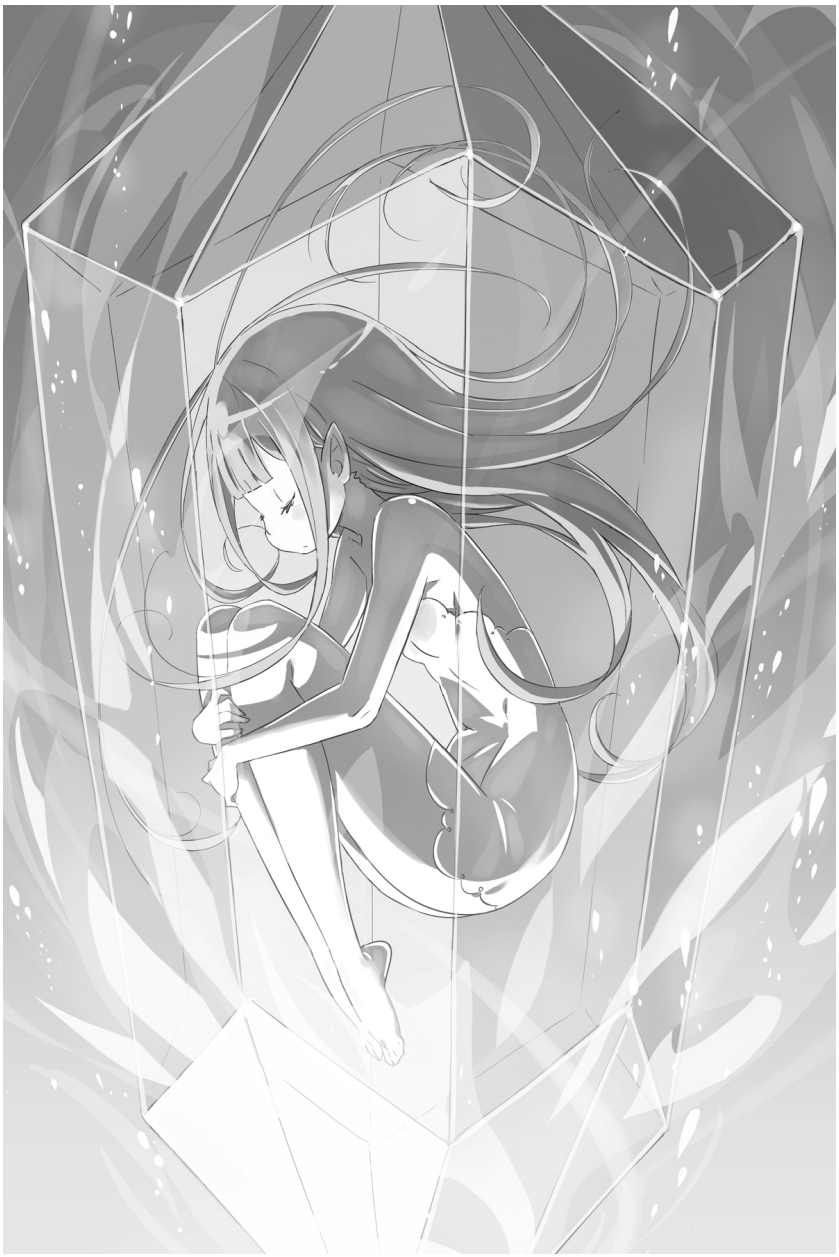
—On the inside of the beautiful blue light was a curled-up girl, her body sealed inside the crystal.

"Th-this…is…"

Wobbly, Subaru entered the room with a precarious gait, drawing nearer to the crystal.

The sight stole his eyes away. Such was the extent of the surreal beauty before him.

The blue transparent crystal put on display a girl so beautiful it was tragic. The impression given was near to that of a block of ice, but unlike ice, which could be melted to free someone from it, the crystal was eternal so long as it remained unbroken. And breaking the crystal would be the same thing as breaking the girl's life.



It was a cruel work of art, with the crystal girl as the centerpiece—and her face was familiar to him.

"…Ryuzu, is that you?"

The person inside the crystal had long pink hair. The still-young physique was clad in a simple one-piece dress. Her body was curled up like someone sitting with folded legs in phys ed class, and the girl's long-eyelash-bearing eyes were closed as if she was asleep.

This was, without any doubt, Ryuzu Bilma, the representative of the Sanctuary.

Or more precisely, he ought to have called her a girl who was Ryuzu's spitting image.

"It's not just the crystal. What's with the whole atmosphere of this room…?"

The metallic pedestal supporting the crystal gave off a faint light, granting dim lighting to the entirety of the room. Subaru's eyes, then accustomed to darkness, found the light sufficient to survey the entire layout of the room.

The impression the scene gave Subaru was that of a bizarre experimental facility.

Of course, this was a world far removed from mechanical technology. That place was no exception, and he could see no extravagant devices within it. And yet, Subaru had without doubt received the impression it was an experimental facility.

Perhaps that impression had come not from Subaru but through the memories within him.

And the answer was likely—

"Something you only get from coming here. That's the sense I get. Close enough?"

"…I wonder. I am not confident I have the answers you seek, Young Su."

"That excuse stopped working the second you showed up here, I gotta say."

Turning around, he offered a strained smile to the figure that spoke after appearing at the entrance. The familiar face seemed tired somehow as it pleasantly returned the smile—and moreover, there were two of them.

The one with the staff with whom Subaru had exchanged words was Ryuzu Bilma. And the other one was—

“This is the…girl who guided me after the teleportation?”
“

Accordingly, he chose to not tell Ryuzu anything else.

But what had developed from that, namely Subaru acting based on his belief in those memories, was another matter.

He believed that by going there and asserting these memories, he would draw closer to Ryuzu's secret.

"And in point of fact, I turned out to be the bait drawing Ryuzu out. Wasn't far-fetched or reckless at all, was it?"

"It was certainly a gamble for you. Did you think about what Young Gar might do if he spotted you?"

"I did think about it, so I asked Ram to keep him occupied. In the meantime, it's a date between you and me, Ryuzu."

"I am unsure what it is you mean by *dayte*…but I cannot defy you at this point, Young Su. You may do with me and the girl here as you wish."

"That's giving in a little *too* much! In the first place, I just want to ask you some things. If possible, I'd like to ask you for your cooperation afterward, but…"

This was hardly his first choice but if push came to shove, it was entirely possible that he would have to confront Garfiel.

As a matter of fact, he didn't know for sure that Ryuzu agreed with all of Garfiel's positions. Subaru needed to think of inflated hopes or easy trust as dangerous things.

"—There is no need for concern. It is as I said. I cannot defy your words, Young Su."

However, in the face of Subaru's concerns, Ryuzu repeated herself as if trying to remind him of something.

The weight of those words left Subaru downright perplexed. Ryuzu wore a thin, pleasant smile that confused Subaru as she glanced at the girl standing right beside her who bore the same face as she did. Then she picked up from where she had left off.

"We cannot defy the Apostles of Greed. —This is the pact that has been imposed upon us, the replicas of Ryuzu Meyer."

Somehow, resignation seemed to cross her powerless smile as she spoke.

## 4

They exited the facility and led Subaru to a single house in a place that was isolated even by Sanctuary standards.

They could not simply return to the settlement, and Subaru was

reluctant to hold a conversation in a place with such a caustic odor, so this suited him just fine. It seemed a little too good to be true, but—

"Such a deeply suspicious child. With that personality, you will die of mental fatigue at a young age."

"That's unexpectedly unfunny, and sometimes things get to you whether your suspicions are deep or shallow."

When Subaru was looking around the room in dead seriousness, Ryuzu gave off a sigh with the air of a strained smile. Then she set her cane aside, picking up a pot for pouring tea in its place.

"Sit somewhere suitable. I will pour the tea."

"I know how to pour tea at least. Ram taught me so I'm a bit confident in my skill."

"A great part of me would be grateful for that, but now is simply not the time, is it?"

With the smiling, eyes-narrowed Ryuzu watching him, Subaru sat down on a bed, and the Ryuzu look-alike girl grasped Subaru's tracksuit, as if trying not to let him escape.

Subaru was at a loss as to what to call the girl who Ryuzu herself had called a replica, until finally—

"She's really clingy… Er, no, that can't be it. Piko doesn't plan on letting me escape, I take it?"

"Nicknames aside, she bears no ill will. Apostles must be welcomed with special favor. I assure you, she will not mind if you give her a little slap for being naughty."

"Calling it naughty makes it sound a lot less like a bold confrontation, you know…"

Ryuzu's elderly advice brought a look of dissatisfaction from Subaru. With Subaru like that, Ryuzu handed him a steaming cup, then proceeded to sit in a chair and turn to face him.

"It is hot tea. 'Tis it not best to blow on it first?"

"I'm not a little kid, so I'm not gonna bring it to my mouth all nervous and give myself a big burn, okay?"

"There is a restless one close to me with a cat's tongue, so I am in the habit of giving warnings."

From the teasing way she said it, the one with the cattiest tongue, least able to take the heat, had to be Garfiel.

Bringing the poured tea to his lips and finding it fairly hot, just as Ryuzu had said, he wet his dry lips and took a breath. When he thought about it, this was the first moisture he had received since

his Return from Death—in other words, since awakening in the tomb. His throat was craving that moisture beyond what he'd expected.

And so Subaru promptly drank the cup dry, audibly placing the cup on the table as he spoke.

"There we go. I know this is right after an unsettling conversation, but can we get to the point?"

"How impatient of you. But I have no reason to refuse or the personality to do so. Do as you please."

"You being cooperative is a big help… And I take it that this Apostle of Greed is kind of the reason you're so cooperative?"

As they began the Q&A session, Subaru efficiently cut straight to the most recent question on his mind.

It was the first time he was hearing the term, but it was the sort of thing that required little in the way of imagination after hearing it. After all, there was just too strong a whiff of a connection to the Witch of Greed.

The question made Ryuzu close her eyes and sink into thought. By no means was she rejecting his first request of the conversation. It was just that the silent girl was displaying a quite gloomy expression.

Finally, Ryuzu let out a sigh that sounded far older than suited her appearance as she said, "…Young Su, surely you know whose hands first established this land?"

"Whose hands? That'd be Roswaal's fami— No, it wouldn't."

Answering reflexively, Subaru shook his head midway, realizing his answer was wrong.

The Sanctuary had purportedly been administered to by the Roswaal family for generation after generation, and the current Roswaal had inherited that role. However, it sounded like the administrator and the creator were two separate parties.

"Meaning the one who built this place was the Witch of Greed… Echidna."

"Yes. A certain Witch built upon this soil a place to accomplish a certain Witch's purpose. It is a testing ground to fulfill a dream traced by that certain Witch."

"Testing ground… Garfiel said something pretty close to that."

Garfiel had made the statement when Subaru and the others arrived at the settlement in the Sanctuary.

He had called this deadlocked testing ground the tomb of the

Witch of Greed. At the time, the word *Witch* had seemed most important, so he'd let the *testing ground* part slide, but now that he had seen the girl in the crystal, the impression given by that facility made him unable to forget those words any longer.

"If this is the Witch of…Echidna's testing ground, what kind of test is she running?"

"The details of the test, you ask? Where that is concerned, the examples of success are right before you, Young Su."

The corners of Ryuzu's lips twisted as she spread both arms out in a theatrical gesture. Her behavior made Subaru's breath catch. —When he guessed the true meaning of her words, he sent his gaze toward Ryuzu and Piko.

"So Ryuzu and this girl are the results of the experiment being conducted here."

"—There was a girl who looked exactly like me shut inside the crystal, yes?"

"…Yeah, your spitting image. Ryuzu, are you, Piko, and her triplets of some kind?"

"If you wish to treat those with the same faces as sisters, three is a number that is just a little insufficient."

"Just a little, huh?"

"Just a little, yes."

By joking around "just a little," Ryuzu delicately evaded the truth. But Subaru already knew what Ryuzu was trying to gloss over —that there were over twenty replicas.

That said, there was nothing to be gained from pointing that out. The important things were the fine details about the relationship between that facility and the replicas and the experiment being conducted in the Sanctuary.

"That crystal…or a magic crystal rather? That girl inside of it, what's her relationship to you, Ryuzu?"

Switching his wording from *crystal* to *magic crystal*, Subaru unhesitatingly cut to the heart of the matter. Receiving his question, Ryuzu shifted her gaze toward the wordless girl.

"The answer to that question is not an issue for me alone. This girl and I stand in identical positions."

"The girl in the magic crystal included, right?"

"No, that girl alone is different. That girl alone is the exception, for that girl alone is the real one."

Having been told this yet being unable to digest the contents,

Subaru skeptically knit his brows.

"Real one? What do you mean by 'real one'…?"

"Now, now, do not be hasty. An elder's tale is constructed by sifting through old memories. One must be prepared to come along for the ride."

"I've come this far, so can you stop appealing to your age, which aside from tone of voice doesn't show at all? I've got tasteless, odorless Pico right beside me already, so if there's nothing but that old granny scent for seasoning, I'm gonna split in two right here."

"Hmm…this has given rise to a rather unfortunate misunderstanding. To me, everything I have constructed about myself is precious, for that is how I gained my individuality."

"Gained your individuality?"

Having heard the turn of phrase, he repeated it, unable to simply let it go. Subaru desperately tried to make his brain digest it, but Ryuzu, paying no heed to his mental anguish, added, "That's right," before continuing her tale.

"Tasteless and odorless… It is as you say, Young Su. That girl is empty on the inside. And I began the same. The 'me' that you see today is no more than the contents poured into an empty vessel over the course of long months and years."

"Wait, wait, wait! This conversation's developing really fast! Created? Still empty? We skipped over somethin' really important there. Saying the girl in the magic crystal is the real one isn't enough of an explanation!"

"The girl within the magic crystal *is* the original, the first Ryuzu. —Ryuzu Meyer."

Subaru drew in his breath when that name was stated. Ryuzu greeted his hesitation with a single nod and said, "That is the real Ryuzu. All other Ryuzus, me included, are replicas of Ryuzu Meyer…which would make us imitations."

Thus did Ryuzu declare that she—like the others—was a duplicate.

Subaru had no immediate follow-up to that explanation. Her explanation just then matched up with the vague theory Subaru had inside of him from having seen many Ryuzus for himself. The reason he'd averted his eyes from that theory was none other than Subaru not wanting to believe it.

The prejudice in his mind came from physiological disgust

toward the fact that an “acquaintance” of his was a clone.

“Does knowing I am an imitation change how you see me?”

“…Dunno. I want to say it doesn’t. I want to, I really do… especially when the person concerned asks that right in front of me.”

Since he was in a different world than his own, it was not appropriate for him to call Ryuzu a clone. The way she had been born was probably fundamentally different from Subaru’s imagination. Besides, even if it was a fact she was a replica, all life was equal. It had to be equal. —Yes, even though he understood it in his head…

“I don’t have any confidence I could nod and say that with a chill look on my face. So I’m not gonna say those words lightly.”

“You are kind, Young Su. That is also being soft, naive… excessively honest to the core.”

He’d been absolutely certain it was not an answer that would leave her pleased. But Ryuzu nodded, apparently satisfied with Subaru’s reply. The gesture tugged at Subaru’s thoughts, and he came to stare at the girl sitting right beside him.

The girl he’d dubbed Piko as a matter of convenience gazed at the room with emotionless eyes. She continued to keep hold of Subaru’s sleeve, almost looking like a doll. —Even though it was impossible for a doll to have her physical warmth.

“That you feel something like physical warmth is no more than a function of a false body.”

“A false body… Whaddaya mean, false? I can touch it and everything.”

“Producing a vessel of flesh from nothing is no easy thing. Can you even imagine the principles by which the girl and I are able to exist like this, Young Su?”

She said it like she was testing him. Subaru restrained his mind’s craving for an immediate answer and sank into thought. With Ryuzu taking such an earnest posture, he wanted his own demeanor to be in kind. For that sake, he brought all mental hands on deck.

“Could it be mana…? So making a body like that of a spirit?”

Abruptly, the existence of a little kitty Great Spirit quite familiar to him broached that possibility in his mind.

Normally, Puck was inside a crystal; when he materialized, he formed a physical body out of mana. Was it not possible that a

physical body, a false body that held warmth, might follow along the same lines?

Ryuzu responded to Subaru's idea by clapping her hands, acting quite impressed.

"Well done. You did well to think of that, even though no one told you the answer."

"That's because you gave me a hint that led me to the answer. All I did after that was realize from a spirit that's close from time to time… So should I take that as meaning I'm right?"

"It is very close to the mark. Our physical replica bodies are created by a ritual, using artificial odo at its core. Enshrouding mana around this core materializes these bodies into being."

"Odo, that was the power in the body, as distinct from the mana that floats in the atmosphere, wasn't it?"

"Odo rests within all that lives. Accordingly, it is even said that odo is proof of the soul."

The mismatched gravity with which the young voice spoke the words made Subaru unwittingly draw in his breath.

If odo was proof of the soul, then using a ritual to create it was surely—

"This is kind of putting it lightly, but ain't that…creating life?"

"Of course, rather special conditions must be in order to make such a phenomenon possible. Unfortunately, I was unable to comprehend the details. —You may simply think of the formula's creation as the result of a Witch's quest and the result obtained via experimentation."

"This is pretty far-out stuff… She was really something, huh?"

Becoming the creator of life was a feat that rivaled God himself. Setting aside the pros and cons of accomplishing the feat, it was surely worth praising the talent behind bringing it into fruition. — Yes, the talent itself was praiseworthy.

However, the impression that the feat of creating life was violating a sacred taboo was another matter entirely.

"I wonder what she did an experiment like that for? I suppose that's the next topic for discussion."

"Mmm."

"Put bluntly, magic's totally out of my expertise. I can't even begin to understand how incredible what Echidna did is. Even so, I can tell it's really something else."

As Ryuzu folded her arms, adopting the posture of the listener,

Subaru continued his words.

"Where'd the motivation come from to do something that incredible? What brought it on? Why did Echidna make the replicas of Ryuzu…of Ryuzu Meyer?"

As mysteries of the Sanctuary went, the girl named Ryuzu Meyer stood in the number one spot.

The Ryuzu Bilma before his eyes called herself the Sanctuary's current representative. Her family name differed from that of the original. From the conversation to date, he could tell that she had arrived at that position over the course of a prolonged period of time. In that case, where Ryuzu Meyer's relationship to the Witch was concerned—

"…I thought I'd float a possibility that came to mind."

"Oh-ho. Do tell?"

"This is the time-honored way these stories tend to go—my theory is, for some reason, the girl named Ryuzu Meyer lost her life, and she tried to resurrect the girl in the form of replicas."

The eternal search for how to bring back a life that had been lost, realistic or not, was a difficult issue.

There were all kinds of ideas proposed to deal with that difficult issue, including reproducing the dead via clone technology, which led to constructing substitutes in their place. And in the vast majority of these fictional circumstances, this was greeted by numerous failures along the lines of *Even if you bring the physical body back, you cannot bring back the soul*.

"Given what you said, Ryuzu, and the state of Piko here, the possibility this experiment ended in the same kind of failure seems pretty high. It feels like, even if the appearance is completely the same, you can't reproduce what's on the inside."

If Echidna stubbornly kept creating more replicas without giving up, that was truly an act of madness. Even after over twenty failures, had she continued hoping for the possibility the soul might be resurrected?

But the one thing Subaru couldn't do was dismiss that as mere obsession. He absolutely could not think of wanting for, struggling for someone to be brought back to life as wrong. Not Subaru, racing in search of an optimal future that very moment—

"Although I think you and the others are probably qualified to blame her, Ryuzu."

"And say, we did not ask to be created like this? I have lived a

little too long to make such a naive plea… Besides, it seems you have an overidealized view of the Witch, Young Su."

"'Overidealized view of the Witch'?"

Subaru's eyes went wide, as if he'd never expected that to be said to him. To that Subaru, Ryuzu said, "It is as if you are watching a dream," forming a smile that gave off a rather desolate air as she gently shook her head.

"I take it, you are thinking along the lines of…if the Witch went to the extreme of such experiments to bring Ryuzu Meyer back to life, the girl must have been an irreplaceable being from the perspective of the Witch?"

"Well, yeah… I mean, is there any other answer?"

In point of fact, no other answer came to mind. The Witch had tried to bring the girl back to the point of drawing up a ritual to create a soul. So the girl must have been that important to her—what other answer was there?

"Ryuzu Meyer was a mere village girl. The circumstances of her birth were just a little special, but…she was certainly not close to the Witch nor were they related by blood. Ryuzu Meyer and the Witch were such strangers that the times they had spoken could no doubt have been counted on one hand."

"

“My, my. Having that said to my face is rather hurtful, you know?”

“Please don’t make light of it! I’m seriously… I’m seriously asking this!”

He accepted that his statement was inconsiderate. But it wasn’t a situation where he could tread lightly.

The force of Subaru’s words brought a rather strained smile from Ryuzu. She gently touched a hand to her chest.

According to the explanation to that point, there was no heart beating behind her diminutive chest. However, Piko conveyed warmth to him as she sat by his side. Where was that heat coming from? he wondered.

This was the proof of the soul, the result created by Echidna’s experiment to create life—

“—That girl and I, born empty, are successes of the Witch’s experiment. Those words are no lie.”

As Ryuzu repeated her earlier words, Subaru calmed down his quickened heart and nodded.

Ryuzu was saying that their being born as dolls in an empty state and not as reproductions of the original, Ryuzu Meyer—this was by the Witch’s intent. What was the meaning behind this?

“Back then, the girls leaping at the Witch were all the same as Piko…”

Obeying Garfiel’s commands, the replicas had sacrificed themselves against the Witch enshrouded by a vast shadow without the slightest fear. They’d been made that way…like dolls, merely obeying the commands issued to them.

Was that what that white-haired Witch wanted? Was that what she was after?

“You could pass it off as curiosity to that point, but what could she learn from that? If she wanted that, brainwashing someone appropriate would’ve been a hell of a lot faster. Don’t tell me the motivation was madness of some sort—like, I thought of making them, so I did…”

And if it was so, that would be that. But for some reason, he was certain that it was not.

Why would Echidna make something from nothing, an empty vessel, something you could pour anything into—

“—Ah.”

Instantly, he saw it in the far distance, a possibility pieced

together from various fragments.

It was simply a preposterous thought, the sort that one ought to forget about with a single shake of the head. But once the thought was given life, Subaru's brain grabbed hold of it and would not let go.

This was the Witch of Greed, curiosity incarnate. She had a logical objective that lived up to that lofty title. She had a reason for constructing an empty vessel with nothing inside. After all, what is an empty vessel for—

"—It's obvious. It's for pouring something into it."

If the empty vessel was the completed form, the objective was to fill it.

Just what would fill such a vessel? What could possibly be the ambition of someone called a Witch, a person who had a bottomless craving for knowledge and wanted to know all there was to learn in the world?

What was that something the Witch wanted to pour into an empty Ryuzu Meyer—

"—She'd pour personality, memory, knowledge…in other words, a soul."

The deduction made Subaru feel like his throat had suddenly gone dry. In his place, Ryuzu picked up where Subaru left off.

Her blue eyes narrowed, and though the old woman seemed to be peering far into the distance, her gaze rested on her own offshoot standing right at his side—no, this was no offshoot. She shifted her eyes toward the doll that was like her own little sister.

"The Witch was supposed to pour herself into the body of Ryuzu Meyer. This was, in other words—"

"—one type of immortality."

It was this conclusion that unveiled the truth about the experiment conducted in the Sanctuary.

## 5

Immortality. There were many legends about such a thing stretching from ancient to modern times, from Occident and Orient alike. Life reaching that point formed an ideal.

For eternity, one would never grow old or wither, and the "self" would be tied to the world without passing through the great cycle of death and reincarnation. Even knowing that this violated the

defining rules of life, there was much that was attractive about arriving at the pinnacle of living—

Yet, an exceedingly decrepit ring of truth rested behind those grandiose words.

"Immortality, that's…a greedy thought even for a Witch. Immortality… It comes off as the goal of a small person obsessed with her own life, I've gotta say…"

"Whether being reluctant to part with life is a sign of poor character is open to personal interpretation, but at the very least, the Witch does not seem to regard her own life as a trivial thing. Fear of death is natural, as is searching for a way to keep it at bay. In most circumstances, it is the sort of desire one might laugh off, but…"

"Echidna was someone who had the ability to make it into a reality. And this is the result of that line of thinking?"

Looking down at Piko as she sat at his side, Subaru had the annoying sense that he couldn't say anything bad about that. Piko did not react to his gaze, either. She simply had a vacant expression, as if simply awaiting his command.

"…If these girls really are empty, even making them cry like little babies would've been way better…"

"Apparently, that was not the Witch's desire. What the Witch wanted in the end was a vessel…not one with a personality such as I but one beginning with the minimum intelligence required to obey instructions. To a certain extent, that would also give the Witch the option of keeping or discarding the memories of the girl from which they were extracted."

Memory and intelligence were installed and saved within the empty vessel. Those were the easiest words he could use to describe it, but they weren't talking about data. They were talking about a single person's personality, memories, knowledge…a person's soul.

"It'd let her implant her own memories into a new vessel. By doing that, when one body became old, if she kept creating new vessels, that'd definitely become one form of immortality. But…"

Maybe you could call passing down the personality and memory one sure way of conquering death. If you saved a personality like data, even if one vessel was destroyed due to some mistake, you could be resurrected through installation into a new vessel.

You could copy the personality, and you could copy the

physical body—that was the immortality Echidna had theoretically established.

And when he unraveled the method behind the immortality Echidna had aimed for, he realized something.

"Ahhh, so that's it… So that's how it is."

"Young Su?"

Suddenly, a sense of acceptance calmed the inside of his chest, and a dry smile came over Subaru.

The smile made Ryuzu's brows grimace, but Subaru did not give her any reply. After all, it was meaningless to speak about it. There was no one who could understand what was inside Subaru's chest that moment.

"Finally, I get it… I get the reason why you acted all chummy with me."

To the smiling Echidna on the back of his eyelids, Subaru quietly let out what seemed like admiration.

Echidna's objective was to prepare multiple replicas to inherit her own life and the personality and knowledge therein—immortality achieved through transference of the soul. This was, in other words, none other than her method of preparing for what came "after" life.

"—Just how different is that from my Return by Death…?"

From their very first meeting onward, Echidna had harbored a great deal of goodwill toward Subaru. She'd been his confidant, speaking to him at great length, and through the conduct she had displayed, the distance between them had been reduced, and she had obtained his trust.

Now he understood the true intent behind those actions. This was the Witch's joy…a joy akin to that of discovery.

"I understand how you felt at the time… I mean, I was happy enough to cry…"

When Subaru had revealed Return by Death, it had saved him. Truly, he'd looked at the world a different way since. Probably she'd had the same feeling from the first time she and Subaru had met. That's why Echidna…

"

cloth.

Echidna desired immortality. Subaru continued to pile on death to win his future.

The methods did not change that both were engaged in rebellion at the single "life" that they ought to have had.

If that was so. —If that was so, in a true sense, was not Echidna the one being who could truly understand where he was coming from, and Echidna, him?

"…Ryuzu, I understand your position…and what Echidna was trying to do, too. So knowing this, I ask you…did Echidna succeed in her goal?"

"Her goal, in other words…"

"She prepared the vessels. All that was left was to overwrite one with her. Did that overwriting succeed? No, if I was to put it more bluntly…"

—Was Echidna alive somewhere in that world that very moment?

He'd cut off his words halfway because he felt like his tongue was going numb. But as if she sensed what was in his thoughts, Ryuzu shook her head. Slowly, she shook her head.

"I imagine it is to the chagrin of the Witch, but her plan was a failure… Echidna was not passed down."

"Wh-why not? Did the personality installa— Etching fail?"

"It was not a complete failure. However, from the Witch's point of view, her wish was incompletely granted."

"Whaddaya mean, incompletely?"

"It is a simple matter… If the amount poured is too great for the vessel, of course the rest spills out. If one portion spills out, what remains is already something different from the original."

Blinking at the echo of the word *vessel*, Subaru looked at Ryuzu, then Piko.

"When you say the vessel isn't enough to hold it, you're not talking about physical size, are you?"

"Perhaps it is better to say, the capacity for the soul. People are suited to the various souls that are inside of them. The vessel of Ryuzu Meyer was simply insufficient to accept the Witch of Greed."

"Didn't she…know that beforehand somehow?"

"I cannot know the entirety of a Witch's thoughts. But the vessel chosen by the Witch, Ryuzu Meyer, was insufficient for the Witch's hopes. As a result, her plans went awry…and a terrible

failure came to be born."

"Goodness," went Ryuzu, a tired look on her as her shoulders fell. Subaru felt the same way.

Echidna had overlooked something in the fine details, an unfathomable error for a Witch. Knowing the person concerned, Subaru thought such an error was eminently understandable and predictable but—

"So the plan failed…but she still made replicas after that, right?"

"…However, those replicas were born from filling the magic crystal in that facility with a certain level of mana. The Witch designed it so that the magic crystal itself forms them."

"The magic crystal itself… You mean she made it make the replicas automatically?"

"As a result, after the Witch's death, only the facility remained, and even today the number of replicas continues to grow… It is all a matter of mana. That we require no material resources to live is the single saving grace."

These words spoken, Ryuzu audibly sipped her tea with the same mouth that had just announced she required neither food nor drink.

"…You seem to drink tea just fine, though."

"This is a hobby of mine. It is an individual quirk I acquired over the course of a long life."

Subaru's listless jab made Ryuzu's little throat ring out with laughter. Feeling a little rescued by that laugh, Subaru let out a long sigh and put a question onto his lips.

"So what about this first 'failed' replica? Even if you couldn't stuff the entire soul in, she must've inherited part of a Witch's memories, right? Even if it wasn't all the way, she'd still end up pretty witchy, right?"

"When poured liquid spills, one cannot pick and choose which part spills out? If it is minor memories that spill out, there might be no hindrance to everyday life, but if parts with a crucial impact on personality spill out, it is already beyond salvaging."

Subaru thought Ryuzu's roundabout explanation must apply to the first failed replica. In other words, she became something far from the Witch's expectations—

"Thanks to that replica having a completely bankrupt personality yet having inherited a fragment of the power of the

Witch of Greed, it was apparently quite the uproar. Though she was disposed of, it caused the Lady Ros of prior generations quite a bit of anguish."

"Disposed of… I see."

"Of course, if she was one to give up after a single failure, she would not have pursued immortality to begin with. Reflecting upon her failure, the Witch's next thought was perhaps the net volume of the soul could be modified."

"Takes one hell of a soul to come up with *that*!"

In other words, the idea was nothing short of compressing the data before transfer. Subaru could understand because he had a passing familiarity with computers and the concept of moving amounts of data around, but Echidna was quite something to arrive at the same idea without that knowledge and apply it to the soul at that.

"But it sounds like…that failed, too."

"It did not. The Witch did not make it in time. The Witch of Jealousy swallowed her up before she could do so."

After the last of that statement, of how the great hope harbored by Echidna the Witch had gone to waste, she let out a distinct sigh.

Subaru, too, knew how the six Witches bearing the titles of the other Deadly Sins had met their end. Already destroyed by the seventh Witch, the Witches in the false, transient encounters within the castle of dreams were nothing more than vestiges of their souls.

Or perhaps remaining in soul form alone was simply a matter of Echidna's stubbornness.

"So Roswaal's family has been administering the Sanctuary since Echidna passed away. Ryuzu, can I assume…you live here for the same reason?"

"It is so where Young Ros is concerned, but I live here because I am bound by the pact."

The word *pact* brought a dramatic rise from Subaru's eyebrows. He didn't have any good memories of that or similar words since arriving in that world: pact, vow, covenant—the whole bunch.

Not noticing the state Subaru was in, Ryuzu made a very deep sigh.

"As the replicas go, I was one of the first four. I was granted the knowledge and personality required to administer the Sanctuary as the number of replicas continue to increase. That duty continues even now."

“So you were given a personality and a role from the time you were born?”

“My quirks come from my upbringing after the fact, but it was quite a hardship at first. I had a duty, yet I had no memory. Many years would pass before I could truly appreciate living each and every day.”

Somehow, her words had a pained echo to them, no doubt from thinking of the months and years that had passed to date.

Only Ryuzu could know the hardships she had faced on the long road she had walked. It had been four centuries since Echidna’s death—it was a span of time that Subaru couldn’t even begin to imagine.

“I am grateful for your consideration, but you need not wear that painful look. I believe there is deep meaning behind the duty I fulfill. Their circumstances are varied, but because I was here, I was able to save a great many brethren. Maintaining this place has tangible meaning.”

These words spoken, Ryuzu smiled, and Subaru felt pressure inside of his chest.

By brethren she had saved, she meant the demi-human people living in the Sanctuary had been exposed to bias and discrimination, unable to stay in any one place for long. Whatever the Witch’s intentions, this had become a place of peace to them, a homeland they had attained at long last.

—But several days hence, even that land where they could live in peace would be cruelly eaten apart by the fangs of demon beasts.

“

“The conversation flew away a little so I forgot, but can you tell me about this Apostle of Greed business?”

“Ahhh, that’s right. It is something I took so much for granted, I failed to realize.”

“Please. If I don’t understand that, I won’t be able to relax ’cause I won’t know the reason this girl’s acting so fond of me.”

Glancing sidelong at Piko, she remained wordless and unreactive from beginning to end, never leaving Subaru’s side. — And that term, the *Apostles of Greed*, was the answer.

“Answer me, Ryuzu. No need to gloss anything over. Just tell it like it is.”

“Let me see… Put simply, the Apostles of Greed are the beings who have the right to command us, the replicas of Ryuzu Meyer. As fellow pawns of the Witch Echidna, our positions are similar…but your authority places you above us, Young Su.”

“Wait, wait, wait! I can’t let that part just slide! Whaddaya mean Echidna’s pawn?!”

“—? It is strange that you are unaware of it. The fact that you stand before the magic crystal is proof you have been acknowledged as being qualified to do so.”

Cocking her head, Ryuzu looked genuinely mystified. Her reaction left Subaru opening and closing his mouth like a fish. Calming down after several seconds like that, he spoke up again.

“…Explain it to me from the beginning. I found that place relying on the memories of other people. That’s why I can’t agree with what you’re telling me. I don’t have anything to do with the Witch…with Echidna.”

Fearful of breaking the taboo, Subaru became selective about his words midway through his sentence. The explanation sent Ryuzu sinking into thought, her childish brow creasing as she made an *mmm* murmur.

“And yet, I feel compulsive power from Young Su’s words. This is unshakable proof that you have become an apostle, Young Su. At the tomb, did you not receive something from the Witch that acknowledged you as her apostle?”

“Something I got from Echidna at the tomb…?”

Thinking back to his passing encounter with Echidna, he couldn’t put his finger on anything that fit the bill.

He had no memory whatsoever of words acknowledging him as an apostle nor of any kind of appointment ceremony. What Subaru

was granted in that dream was a fair bit of knowledge and reassuring and terrifying experiences. And—

"…Wait, don't tell me it was the Dona Tea?"

"Dona Tea?"

"Twice the Witch made me drink what she said were her body fluids disguised as tea…"

"So you took a portion of the Witch into you, then? Without humor or irony, 'tis surely that."

"Why, that little— She really did make me drink one hell of a thing!!"

As the indignant Subaru unwittingly rose to his feet, Ryuzu went, "Now, now," as she chided him. While Subaru's heart and head filled with anger, she smiled at him.

"When all is said and done, it's thanks to that you've come this far. It's not all bad, yes?"

"I'm upset that she set me up and kept quiet about it! What does she think someone's body is? My relations with Witches are complicated as it is, and now I've got Greed and Jealousy all over me…"

First was the Witch of Jealousy, granting Subaru the power of Return by Death without asking; then there was the Witch of Greed, arbitrarily adding him to the ranks of her apostles. Witches really did do things as they damn well pleased.

The instant he also thought of Wrath, Pride, and Gluttony, he was assailed by resignation.

"I mean I knew that… Witches do as they please. I can't really expect much from the last two, either…"

"At any rate, Young Su, you have gained command over the Sanctuary's replicas of Ryuzu Meyer. You may make even me obey any order you please. Quite thrilling for a healthy young man, is it not?"

"I might be a grown young man, but you don't exactly look like a grown young woman…"

Those with particular…tastes might drooled at such an opportunity, but it was a treasure wasted on Subaru. Still, when it came to taking advantage of it, this treasure was certainly a useful one for fulfilling Subaru's objective.

"—If I have the mark of an apostle with command rights, there's an Apostle of Greed besides me here in the Sanctuary, right?"

The question made Ryuzu fall silent. However, her expression told him what wanted to know. More than anything, Subaru had already seen the answer with his very own eyes—the apostle who had given orders to over twenty Ryuzu replicas, employing them in the battle against the Witch.

"Garfiel. He has to have qualifications as an Apostle of Greed, too. And if my guess is right, qualifications to be an apostle aren't something you get unless you meet with Echidna."

And with the Witch having already passed away, that world had only one remaining way to meet her.

"Garfiel's been inside the tomb. He's taken the Trial… Ryuzu, you said yourself that anyone can take it. That's gotta be why he's an apostle."

It wasn't difficult to imagine Garfiel challenging the tomb. He'd probably raced recklessly into the tomb, full of confidence and spirits high, hoping to liberate the Sanctuary.

—And there, Garfiel had no doubt faced his own past.

Subaru didn't know what Garfiel thought of the results. But given the fact that the Sanctuary's barrier had not been lifted, Garfiel's challenge of the Trial must have ended in failure.

And yet, he had become an apostle. After taking the Trial, he must have been invited into the castle of dreams. There he engaged in conversation with Echidna, and then they must have formed some kind of pact. Exactly what kind of pact had been exchanged between them?

Reasoning by analogy, Garfiel's objectives all fit the role of a guardian of the Sanctuary. That was the only point on which there had been no inconsistency between all the runs Subaru had been through so far.

However, once that was removed from the picture, inconsistencies in his words and deeds had appeared between each attempt. Perhaps, for whatever reason, Garfiel's actions had begun to go haywire? Did that have something to do with him being an apostle—no, that was overthinking it.

He couldn't get overly sympathetic for Garfiel. He didn't have the leeway for that.

*He, Garfiel, is my enemy. —It's better that way.*

"Ryuzu, are command rights broadcasted to other apostles?"

"There is no outward sign of it, so no. We might feel the compulsive power ourselves, but surely Young Gar would feel

nothing of that. Nor do I intend to go out of my way to tell him of it.”

“Then let me bind you on that one thing. Even if Garfiel asks, don’t answer him.”

“

“

“The name of Ryuzu is assigned as part of our role. Accordingly, we can only demonstrate our individuality in other places. Hobbies, tastes, and names… Ah, Young Su.”

“…Yeah?”

“If you do not mind, perhaps you could ask the same question to me again? —From tomorrow and thereafter.”

Subaru was silent in the face of Ryuzu’s request as that fleeting, brittle smile crossed her face.

However, it did not take very much time for him to agree to her earnest plea.

## 6

Parting with Ryuzu, Subaru walked to the settlement in the dead of night.

Ahead of him lay the Cathedral—the place where the fleeing people of Earlham Village had been given refuge and the place that served as Subaru’s sleeping place. Most were simply dozing in a huddle, but the villagers did as they were told without complaint, and that courageous spirit greatly bolstered Subaru’s willpower.

“Somehow, I’ve gotta get everyone to the village safe and sound…”

As Suburu murmured, in the back of his mind, the smiling faces of people familiar to him were dyed with blood in an instant. The sights of them being cruelly slain by claw and fang—that came from a future that might not be long in coming.

Be the culprit Garfiel or the Great Rabbit, the difference in the form of death offered no salvation.

But if it was just a matter of liberating the villagers from the Sanctuary, Subaru had a way. He merely needed to ask that they be released on the firm promise that Emilia would undertake the Trial. They wouldn’t refuse.

“Besides, if they’re here…they might do something reckless again.”

On a previous run, the villagers had metaphorically broken their bones to cooperate with Ram and company in aiding Subaru. Then that metaphor became far too literal with the unfolding of a tragedy far worse than the figure of speech could account for. A tragedy that could not be undone.

Subaru didn’t want to go through that again. And it was

something he absolutely could not allow to repeat itself.

Accordingly, he planned to have the people of Earlham Village peaceably released from the Sanctuary. Getting Roswaal to offer such a proposal made it possible. This was an issue he'd already cleared once before.

As for what remained, the next problem he needed to deal with was—

"—Subaru? What are you doing in a place like this?"

*"Wah-yaah!"*

Suddenly, Subaru was taken by surprise by a voice calling out to him from out of the blue. He'd been concentrating so hard on his thoughts that he hadn't noticed her presence whatsoever. Subaru's reaction also seemed to surprise the girl who'd called out to him.

"That preposterous way of being surprised can *really* startle someone, you know?"

"N-no one uses the word 'preposterous' anymore…"

As the surprised girl—Emilia—pursed her lips in protest, Subaru somehow managed to respond with his usual flippancy. In response, Emilia put her hands on her hips and said, "Goodness, Subaru, that mouth of yours never quits. And to think I was worried."

"I didn't do anything that you had to worry about, so it's all right… But since I'm happy that Emilia-tan was thinking about me, I'd like it if you keep me in your thoughts all the time. We could even meet in a dream."

"Sorry, I don't really follow."

Quickly recovering emotionally, Subaru entrusted matters to his gilded tongue as he walked closer to Emilia.

Unlike when they had parted, Subaru noticed that Emilia, framed by the waning moonlight, was wearing thin one-piece pajamas. Without exaggeration, she bore an air of mystery like a fairy spotted on a moonlit night. Subaru felt his cheeks growing warmer at the thought.

"You look like a fairy there, Emilia-tan."

"Ah, you mustn't. You cannot speak badly of people like that. Even I will get upset."

"Calling you a fairy was meant to be a compliment, though!"

"—? But fairies are a type of evil spirit, right? You can't fool me by calling those words of praise."

"Gah, my wooing was foiled by cultural differences…"

Emilia, refusing to lend her ears to Subaru's excuses, puffed up her cheeks. After that, she glanced at the downcast Subaru and let out a long, exasperated sigh.

"Yes, yes, let us leave the jokes there… Subaru, what were you doing at an hour like this?"

"That's my line. I told you not to stay up tonight, and here you are on a nighttime stroll… If Puck was here, he'd say your beauty would be going to waste."

"That's, er…mm, I might not actually have an excuse."

By piling a question onto Emilia's own, Subaru hid from her the information he had gleaned that night. She didn't need to know about the circumstances of Ryuzu's birth or about the Witch. It would just be an extra burden to bear.

But Emilia's nighttime stroll bugged him on a mundane level. His question made her cast her eyes down.

"Um, having you say that to me makes this a little embarrassing, Subaru, but I couldn't sleep at all since… So I went out for a stroll with the night breeze hitting me. It helped calm me down a little."

"…Really are uneasy about the Trial, then?"

"It's not that… Well, it might be that. But I don't really understand it myself. I thought, maybe by walking around I could find out what it was. Really, if only—"

Cutting her words off there, Emilia lowered her eyelids, donning a gentle self-deprecating smile.

Even without saying them, Subaru understood the words that lay ahead of where she had cut them off. Emilia probably wanted to say this: *Really, if only Puck were here.*

"…I guess I'm a stand-in to the very end, huh?"

"Eh?"

"Nah. Emilia-tan… Emilia, you're doing great. You really want to run from it, and there's nothing wrong with that. I really respect you for not letting that keep you down and standing up to face it."

On her one opportunity to do so, Emilia would continue her challenge, undaunted by the allure of running away. The result might still be unpalatable, but even so, Subaru saw her trying to fulfill her duty with all her might.

That was why Subaru's words were true, no falseness to them whatsoever.

He respected Emilia, Ram, Otto, Petra, the villagers.

He thought similarly of Puck, Roswaal, Ryuzu, and Frederica.

For that sake, he had to overcome the obstacles known as Garfiel, Elsa, the Beast Master, and the Great Rabbit.

"Wh-what's with you all of a sudden? You saying that out of the blue…it's startling."

"It's not all of a sudden. I always think that; I'm just taking the time to say it. I wish I could say it in a more romantic way, but I guess you'll have to settle for a moonlit night."

Hearing Subaru's words made Emilia furiously blink her violet eyes. Smiling at the sight, Subaru spread his arms wide as if trying to hug the night sky itself.

"I don't know how much strength my words'll have, but I'm saying it 'cause I feel like it. Emilia, you'll be all right. I'm sure you can do it. I'm here for you."

"Subaru…"

"My words might not be much compared to the real deal, but if playing the role helps, great."

He truly did not know how much his words could support her in the stead of what she truly wanted to hear from her family. Even so, Subaru's words made Emilia give the crystal lying against her chest a squeeze.

"…Mm, thank you. That *really* gave me the courage I need. Really."

"So I managed to help Emilia-tan a little bit?"

"Don't say weird things like 'a little bit.' Subaru, you've always been helping me… Even today, I failed, and still you…"

"But tomorrow'll probably be different. You'll make sure of it, right?"

In the face of Subaru closing one eye in a wink, Emilia closed her eyes and let out her breath. Then, after Emilia maintained her silence for several seconds, she nodded.

"—Yeah, I'll do my best. Cheer me on, okay?"

"You know I will."

Subaru responded to Emilia's soft smile by baring his teeth and giving a thumbs-up.

The response deepened Emilia's smile, and after a little bit of mutual laughter, the pair walked toward the settlement. After a bit of quiet time together, they came to a fork in the road.

This was where they would part for that night—Subaru going left to the Cathedral, Emilia going right to the Ryuzu residence.

“Well, you’d better get some sleep this time, Emilia-tan. Any loss of your beauty is a loss for the world.”

“That way of talking is a lot like Puck. You too, Subaru. You won’t get taller if you keep staying up at night.”

“I’m at the end of my growth period anyway, so you don’t need to worry about that…!”

With a bitter smile on him, the pair waved as they parted ways then and there. He truly wanted to escort Emilia all the way, but it was unclear just how long Ram’s sabotage keeping Garfiel tied down would last. Blithely running into Garfiel would only be trouble, so with great regret, he abandoned the role of the wolf in gentleman’s clothing.

—Besides, if he was together with Emilia any further, his resolve would be dulled.

“…Looks like everyone’s fast asleep, huh?”

Passing along the nighttime path to bring the Cathedral in sight, Subaru cautiously stepped inside.

The interior of the building had a large hall reminiscent of a place of worship with only candles to illuminate it, and the villagers’ sleeping breaths arose from a communal space. Most of those sleeping in the open space were the village’s menfolk. The women and children and the elderly were sleeping in rooms too frugal to be properly called bedrooms, but they were the closest thing under the circumstances.

Rather than complain about their accommodation, they acted to make the best of it. Subaru greatly admired their ability to do so. He did feel apologetic toward the several traveling merchants wrapped up in similar circumstances.

“That’s why I can’t let them treat me as more special than they are…”

Paying consideration to those asleep, Subaru meticulously made his way to the back of the hall. There lay the space kept open for Subaru, which at first the villagers had kindly furnished with not only a rug and a blanket but also the immense luxury of a pillow.

That was something he just could not allow, so he’d firmly refused in favor of sleeping accommodations like everyone else’s.

“—So you’re back, Mr. Natsuki?”

“Ew, ew, sorry, did I wake y—? Doesn’t seem like it.”

Looking back toward the quiet voice, in the sleeping space immediately beside him was a plump bla— Correction, Otto with a

blanket pulled over him. Under the blanket, he was relying on a lagnite ore's light to read a book.

"I was worried that you were so late in returning. I feared you might have carelessly gotten lost in the forest and fallen into distress."

"Like hell I would… Wait, don't tell me you were waiting for me to come back?"

"I will not for I did not. I am merely adjusting the calculations for how much the merchants here with me need to demand from the Marquis for compensation for the loss of business during our time here. Though as it has taken quite a bit more time than I had thought, I was thinking I should finally get some sleep."

As he spoke, Otto closed the book in his hands and returned the luminous ore to its leather pouch. This made the light even more meager, and the expression on his face grew less distinct as well.

But even without being able to see his face, Subaru could manage to see through such a clumsy lie regardless.

"What are you, an overprotective mother…?"

"At least make me out to be the male parent… Er, I actually have no idea what you are referring to."

After trying to gloss things over in various ways, Otto curled up in the blanket and turned his back toward Subaru. Maybe he thought he'd be found out if he said any more. His thinking he hadn't already been found out was kind of pathetic.

Sighing at the sight of his back, Subaru lay on the rug of his own sleeping space. Pulling the blanket up to chest level, he felt sleepiness close at hand, contrary to expectations.

He had no intention of sleeping for particularly long. Even so, his body apparently craved sleep more than he had appreciated.

"Mr. Natsuki, I believe this is very forward of me on various levels, but if anything happens, I am here to listen."

"…This guy says some weird stuff in his sleep. Gives me the creeps…"

"Is that the kind of reply to give to someone worried about you?!"

Riding his emotions and raising his voice, Otto looked like he was immediately covering his mouth with his own hands. Fortunately, there was no sign of the sleep around them being disrupted by that single blow.

"Behave and go to sleep. If the villagers explode because of

your jabs, there'll be no stopping it."

"Um, I was not saying that as a joke…"

"I know, I know. I know already. —And that's why I can't tell you."

The latter half alone was a murmur that seemed to vanish inside of his mouth.

After that, Otto fell into silence, apparently dissatisfied with Subaru's lack of further words. He soon lost his battle against sleep. Subaru heartily sighed as he sensed that from Otto.

He did not doubt Otto's offer in any way. If Subaru asked, no doubt Otto would cooperate. He really was far too good to other people to be cut out as a merchant.

He'd seen that benevolence for his fellow man get him killed. That was why he absolutely wouldn't ask the man for help.

He wouldn't have Emilia or Otto or the people of Earlham Village save him.

Subaru would wager his own life and save them all.

## 7

After several hours of sleep at the Cathedral, Subaru was there when daybreak came to greet the Sanctuary.

Shaking his still-sleepy head, Subaru spurred his mind to awaken. Even that short sleep had somewhat softened the fatigue of brain and body. At the very least, he did not need to worry about falling off a dragon in the near future.

"Well, in the end, I'm relying on your running technique to help with that part."

This said, Subaru stretched a hand out to his favorite pitch-black land dragon—Patlash—standing right beside him. Upon this, their first reunion since the day before, Patlash fondly brought the tip of her nose over to Subaru. Making a little smile at the adorable gesture, he savored the ticklish feeling and stroked her head.

"I know I'm waking you up like this, but I'm counting on you to get the job done. —It'll be one run all the way to the mansion."

Patlash responded to Subaru's request with a sound from her throat. It sounded to Subaru's ears like, *It can't be helped*, leaving him very grateful for the depth of his beloved dragon's fondness.

—Very early in the morning, away from prying eyes, Subaru was trying to leave the Sanctuary.

His objective was to take on affairs at Roswaal Manor, for prioritizing that over the tomb was the plan Subaru had decided on that time around.

In complete secrecy, his aim was to get a grip on the situation arising at the mansion, develop firm countermeasures, and return. In the present circumstances, Subaru remained far more ignorant of the events set to occur at the mansion than the situation in the Sanctuary.

He couldn't save anyone like that. Accordingly, he would proceed to the mansion to learn about those things. Besides—

"If I know the circumstances, I can rely on Echidna, too. Right now, I still don't have enough data to hold a conversation."

He could lament his ignorance and powerlessness after he had acted. Subaru didn't deserve to have such laments yet.

His preparations were insufficient for conversing with the Witch. But that did not mean he was without hope.

"Beatrice, isn't part of the Witch Cult… That I know for sure."

This was something Roswaal had spoken to Subaru about during the go-around before last.

Roswaal had declared that the book in Beatrice's hands was an inferior version of what might otherwise be called a book of knowledge, but that book had nothing to do with the Witch Cult. If Beatrice was unrelated to the Cult, she was not his enemy. He could save Beatrice.

That, to Subaru, was hope. Of course, there were many unnatural aspects to Beatrice's demeanor toward him. But the biggest issue had been held at bay. For the moment, that was enough.

"If there's a way to save Beatrice and then Rem and Petra 'n' Frederica, that clears the mansion side."

Touching the handkerchief wrapped around his wrist, Subaru crisply put his objective into words.

If he knew how to deal with the issues at the mansion, he could pour all his efforts into taking on the tomb and liberating the Sanctuary. If there were firm ways to take on both sides, he ought to be able to break through even those twin towers of suffering.

Just how many times Subaru might have to sacrifice himself for that end was an unknown variable, but—

"—That's the only value I have here."

Flicking a finger off his own forehead, Subaru put his own

resolve into words, carving them into his chest.

This time, his return to the mansion was the morning of the second day, the fastest timing yet. He'd beat out last time's speed record and return to the mansion, spurring Petra and the others to evacuate. Everything would begin with that.

Before he set off, Subaru dealt with his one lingering regret—sliding a letter under the door into the entrance to the Ryuzu residence. The contents were addressed to Emilia, expressing on paper his desire that she not worry about him.

"Not that this makes any logical sense, since my premise is that I'm redoing this world…"

This time, Subaru wasn't telling anyone in the Sanctuary about his return to the mansion. All he'd done was write that letter, an effort to inform Emilia and those immediately around her.

He'd firmly cut down the possibilities of liberating the villagers and taking Ram and Otto with him. This time, Subaru would return to the mansion alone. What he needed to guard against the consequences of that surely had a very simple answer.

Leaving the letter behind even so was to guard against unnecessary accidents. If Subaru clouded the reason for his sudden absence, at a minimum he could avoid chaos in the Sanctuary. He wanted to avoid an undesirable change occurring to the greatest possible extent, passing it off as his running some kind of errand to the mansion and so forth. —That was his ostensible reason, at least.

When you ripped that facade away, his real reason was terribly simplistic. He didn't want to make Emilia sad. That was all.

Even in a land fated to vanish in a world fated to be erased, Subaru did not want to make Emilia sad. For that reason alone, Subaru left a letter behind.

Truly, the best thing would be for Subaru to stay. Her smiling face from the previous night rose into the back of his mind.

"—Let's go, Patlash. Sorry to make you wait."

Shaking his head, Subaru severed himself from lingering regret as he mounted Patlash. When he gripped the reins and spoke to her, Patlash made a little sound, turning her head to the way out of the Sanctuary.

Her running feet already had the blessing of wind repel deployed around them, so that Subaru felt neither the sway of the land dragon nor the resistance of the wind. At a speed outstripping the wind itself, Patlash raced through the forest at daybreak.

Even the Lost Woods of Cremaldi was all for naught before this all-too-clever land dragon. She continued her sprint with no sign of getting lost in the Lost Woods. At that rate, they'd get out of the forest in another hour—

"—Aww, too bad. It's just like the story o' one should be suspicious of Berbe's different sweat."

When the voice poured down from overhead, Subaru instantly pulled back the reins.

Receiving this command, Patlash kicked up a cloud of dust as she slammed the brakes. With the land dragon standing at a halt, her wariness toward the figure standing straight before her as one of the guardian deva kings was laid bare by her neigh.

But if anything, the opponent bared his fangs in amusement at the hostility.

"Ha! Ain't you all worked up early in the mornin'. That land dragon has some serious guts, don't she?"

"…That's because, aside from her tastes in men, Patlash is a completely perfect lady."

"Real adorable of her. —Unlike your land dragon, you're nothin' but a stupid bastard, though."

Ferocious vigor poured out, and from a single step on the ground, Subaru felt as if the forest itself was being shaken. Such was the oppressive feeling that the youth who had shown himself—Garfiel—was thrusting in his direction.

The prickly sense of oppression made Subaru swallow his saliva as he raised both of his hands up.

"…There's a misunderstanding between me and you. I think that's something I need to clear up."

"Misunderstanding…? Like hell there is. You're runnin' away in the middle o' the night with your tail curled between your legs. That's the small of heart for ya. 'Cause if it ain't that…"

On that note, Garfiel audibly clamped his fangs down, a distinct grimace appearing as he said, "—Then that just leaves a guy stinkin' of the Witch headin' out to do wicked deeds, am I right?"

Crinkling his nose, he spat the words out, making his hostility clear.

What he had said made Subaru close his eyes for a moment; then he stroked the agitated Patlash's neck, dismounting so that he would stand at the same eye level as Garfiel. He sighed at confirmation that the Witch's stench—the miasma clinging to his

body—was indeed the cause of Garfiel's antagonism toward him. However, he simultaneously felt that something was a little off.

Amid that vagueness, Subaru formed words for the purpose of giving that amorphous ill feeling a tangible form.

"Just now, you mentioned the Witch's stench, but I've had a fair number of people point that out to me before."

"…Heh, that so? I dunno about what other people think. It's one helluva stench, though."

"Setting my body odor aside, those people decided based on my actions. It'd be a big help if you did the same. At the very least, you let me go right after I came out of the tomb, right?"

"

nose is for real, I can't square it with your actions yesterday."

He started by raising his doubts concerning the miasma. Garfiel's cheek twitched slightly.

"The second is you spotting me as I ran out this morning. It's true that was wildly suspicious…but that's weird, too. Unless you've been tailing me the whole time, it's like you have someone else keeping an eye on me."

His next shot was a bluff, since he'd already heard as much from Ryuzu. Garfiel's pupils narrowed.

"The third and final guess is what links the first and the second together. It's the girl who looks just like Ryuzu that I saw in the forest. That girl—oof."

With the third assertion, he had clearly succeeded in getting under Garfiel's skin—something that became obvious when the world Subaru saw was suddenly flipping upside down when he was only midway through his sentence.

*"—Gwaa!!"*

The next moment, his back was slammed against something hard, wringing out an anguished groan along with all the air from his lungs.

He felt something extremely hard pressing against his back—which turned out to be a fat tree trunk. The palm digging into the center of his abdomen was holding him so far up against the tree that his feet didn't even reach the ground.

As Subaru moaned in pain, the culprit, Garfiel, glared at him from up close and said, "—And where the *hell* did you see that?"

"Whaddaya mean where…? Inside, the forest…was right there for the seeing."

"Ain't no way ya could have been there. Stop tryin' to fool me if ya don't wanna end up squished flat."

An audible *creak* accompanied the increase in pressure, causing drool to spill out as Subaru writhed in agony at the churning his internal organs were going through. Twist as he might, he couldn't even make Garfiel's hand twitch.

"Don't move a muscle, land dragon. You do and I'll crush your precious master."

Garfiel moved to check Patlash, who was about to make a move to rescue Subaru from his suffering. The land dragon snarled in frustration, lowering her center of gravity as if waiting for an opening.

Upon reflection, these two foul-tempered personalities—one man and one beast—had been at odds ever since their first meeting. This explained why Garfiel had been the cause of Patlash's death during a previous run.

Of course, neither of the two concerned knew anything about that—and when Subaru thought about it, he felt his agony ease somewhat.

"…The hell's…wrong with you? Why are you smilin' at a time like this?"

"S…orry, just…remembered something… Made me laugh…"

"—You're off your rocker, damn it."

"Whoa?! The heck are you…?"

With a low murmur, Garfiel suddenly let Subaru go. Unable to break his fall, Subaru tumbled to the ground, immediately glaring at Garfiel as he wondered what the big idea was—and then he realized it.

Resting in Garfiel's eyes was disgust—and a faint trace of fear.

"Garfiel, you're…"

"Shaddap, madman. This ain't funny. Damn it, you were testin' me, weren't ya?"

"

the road when he previously decided to prioritize the mansion. But it wasn't a move he would refuse to play if granted a golden opportunity. There was no denying that his life had been in danger as a result, but—

"—If my life's payment enough, I'll use it to get the results I want."

If the only sacrifice that needed to be paid was in Subaru's heart, he might as well buy something worthwhile with it. If he could cheaply obtain a piece of the puzzle that eventually led to an optimal conclusion, he'd risk his life as many times as it took.

No doubt his determination had been conveyed to Garfiel. Looking revolted from the bottom of his heart, his teeth groaned as he spat a reply.

"I know a bastard who has the same eyes as you do. Me, I hate his guts. Hell, I should crush your head right now while I have the chance."

"I think that'd end up being a problem for both of us. If possible, I'd like you to let me go with a generous heart."

"What proof do I have that lettin' ya go here won't be bad for us lat—"

"—I won't betray Emilia. I won't do anything that'll harm the Sanctuary, either. Believe me."

Brushing dirt off his body, Subaru declared his innocence to Garfiel's suspicious heart.

This was a gamble. If Garfiel suppressed his hesitation and decided to eliminate Subaru then and there, his life could be forfeit at any moment. But from Subaru's point of view, there was still time before that moment arrived.

"

Some might say that he had both won the gamble and lost. Either way, this time he'd apparently managed not to cross the line with Garfiel.

"Now that you're letting me go, mind answering my third question from earlier?"

"I said don't get cocky. Geluugel does not forgive twice, damn it."

"That so. Guess it was too much to ask for, then."

That sour reply made Subaru's shoulders sink as he promptly backed off. Subaru proceeded to mount Patlash as Garfiel kept regarding him with suspicion.

"You don't wanna talk. I have no way of forcing you to talk. Betting on tears to sway you has bad odds, so I won't push it this time. I'm saving you for later."

"This time…? Later…? What the hell are ya talkin' ab—?"

"Don't act all mystified, Garfiel. I know you're hiding something. But I'm going to expose it. That's an absolute certainty. Because that's what needs to be done."

Subaru's plainspoken announcement made Garfiel open his eyes wide. His gaze met with Subaru's. However, this time Subaru was not afraid of that sharp stare.

The power behind Subaru's and Garfiel's eyes as well as the pair's standpoints had been reversed. Garfiel ought to have been overwhelming with his clear advantage in brute force, but he was being held in check by Subaru's bottomless determination.

As if refusing to admit what was happening, Garfiel clacked his fangs once more.

"…Shut up. If I silence you right here, right now, then that 'absolute certainty' goes poof, too."

"Sorry, but this won't change. As long as I don't give up, the moment I know someone's hiding a secret, it's not a secret anymore. If you're gonna blame something, blame your carelessness."

Garfiel, not knowing the meaning behind the cumulative weight of Subaru's words, was beset by total confusion. He had no way of knowing the meaning of Subaru's choice of the word "carelessness," because it wasn't him, but another Garfiel from a previous time that was responsible. And this was both a future him and a him that already was destined never to arrive.

—They were looking at different realities. They were seeing different numbers of possibilities. That was what separated them.

“Do you still want to try and stop me, Garfiel?”

“I—I…”

“If you do, all it’s gonna accomplish is waste time. It’d be helpful if you don’t anymore.”

If Subaru lost his life at this very moment, he’d have to restart from last night in the tomb. Re-creating the exact same conditions to make sure he reached the same point again would be back-breaking work. —Not that he couldn’t do it.

“Damn it…curse you! Why are you here?! What are you trying to do to us?!”

If he didn’t plan on stopping them, then Subaru was just about ready to order Patlash to go right around him. Garfiel’s voice, which sounded pathetic as it echoed through the forest, made Subaru sigh deeply.

“I told you my objective is to save Emilia. I don’t have any intention of doing harm to the Sanctuary… I’m not trying to do anything to you and your people.”

Far from hurting anyone, Subaru’s only goal was but to extend a helping hand.

First and foremost, he was thinking of Emilia and company of course, but it applied to Ryuzu and the residents of the Sanctuary, too. He had no qualms about adding Garfiel to the list. Just—

“—In the time before I get there, I’ll probably make you hate me a few times more. Let me apologize in advance for that. Really, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t get it, I don’t get it, I don’t get it, I don’t get it… I don’t get it!”

Garfiel rejected everything he could not understand. Subaru was intimately familiar with that behavior. *If only I could make him understand somehow*, he thought. But he acted the way he did because he didn’t think that was possible.

When Subaru emitted a sigh heavily laden with resignation, it sparked Garfiel’s indignation and made him explode—

“The hell do ya think you are, lookin’ down on us?! Who the hell asked you to do anything?! It’s none of your… You don’t know anythin’ about this place, anythin’ about the old hags; you don’t know nothin’!!”

“I know I don’t know. Actually, it’s precisely because of that thought that I’m doing this.”

“Whaddaya think ya can do just scratchin’ the surface and

coming around with nothin' but pretty words?! Smilin' all frivolous, talkin' only about stuff like it's a dream, foolin' people with words to make 'em comfortable—you're nothin' but a charlatan son of a bitch!"

"

# CHAPTER 3

## A FOUR-HUNDRED-YEAR-OLD CRY

**1**

When Subaru passed through the gate, slipping through the front courtyard, he looked up at the sun overhead.

Its position in the sky was a bit inclined to the west. Based on that, the time seemed to be a little past noon.

Roughly half a day since leaving the Sanctuary, Subaru emitted a light sigh as he finally arrived before the majestic facade of Roswaal Manor. It was a sigh of relief that he'd at least made it safely that far.

"Could you not show me such a flabbergasted-looking face?"

"…I am not flabbergasted whatsoever. I am merely surprised at your exceedingly quick return."

Saying this was a tall, golden-haired woman whose jade eyes were open wide—Frederica. Coming out to receive the arriving guest, she was beside herself when she noticed it was Subaru in the entryway. From her point of view, he'd returned after only a single day, a virtual somersault. It was natural for her to be surprised.

—However, to Subaru, his time away had been one of repeated upheaval.

"I have a reason for the quick turnaround… It relates to you, too."

"…And so you have returned alone? You did not bring Lady Emilia with you?"

"You know full well why Emilia can't leave the Sanctuary, right? You don't need to put on an act. I think you'll find I've returned a lot better informed than you might assume."

Tension was gripping Frederica, something Subaru intended to

relieve as he raised both of his hands. He didn't want to spark any fruitless arguments. His suspicions about Frederica had already been cleared up once before.

He believed she was positively uninvolved in both the raid on the mansion and the calamity occurring in the Sanctuary.

All she had done was give Emilia that crystal, offered several false pieces of information about the barrier, and refused to explain who had commanded her to do so.

—That said, the secret she was keeping close to the chest was one he absolutely had to expose…

"…Come to think of it, I've sworn to expose the secrets of brother and sister alike. Man, I'm a disagreeable guy."

"Are you speaking to yourself? Also, the way you are staring at my breasts… Y-you mustn't…?"

"I won't go so far as to say I'm not interested in them, but that's not what I'm thinking, okay? Anyway, let's…"

"—Huh?! Subaru?!"

When Frederica noticed the inappropriate place he had let his gaze linger, she reacted by hiding her cleavage and squirming away. Right as Subaru started claiming that it was a misunderstanding, a lively, high-pitched voice rang out. He could hear energetic footsteps approaching as a small, adorable girl in a maid outfit—Petra—raced down to the pair.

"Wah! You came back really fast, didn't you?!"

Lining up beside Frederica, Petra looked up at Subaru, her eyes sparkling with delight at his return. Her reaction made Subaru cross his arms and turn his eyes toward Frederica.

"Hey, see that? This is what a maid's supposed to be like."

"Petra is a special case. I am simply not as charming… Ahhh, so cute."

"—? Su… Master Subaru, Miss Frederica, is something wrong?"

Petra tilted her head, looking puzzled by the exchange between the pair. Glancing at Frederica, who was enraptured by the adorable sight, Subaru patted his own chest in relief.

Petra and Frederica. He was truly glad that he was able to reunite with both of them safe and sound.

Getting to meet Petra again was making the corners of his eyes particularly hot. —After all, Subaru's last memory of Petra was from the height of the tragedy at the mansion, when he grieved at seeing her reduced to only an arm.

“…Master Subaru?”

“Nah, I was just thinking, seeing Petra heals my heart sooo much. Seeing your face is a serious relief. Come to think of it, Petra, this time around, you’re the only one I can talk to without worrying about anything.”

As Petra watched with upturned eyes, Subaru flashed a smile and stretched a hand toward her. He proceeded to stroke her reddish-brown hair as if he was combing it, something she happily accepted.

“Master Subaru, let us put that envia— That charming cuddling for later. You wanted to speak with me, yes?”

“Sounded like a bit of your true feelings slipped through for a second there, but not dragging things out is a big help… Is talking in the lounge okay?”

“I shall be there with tea. Petra, show him in.”

“Yes, Miss Frederica. Master Subaru, this way, please.”

Briskly dividing their duties, Frederica headed to the kitchen while Petra pulled Subaru’s hand as she guided him along.

“

Easily accepting even Subaru's vague, half-baked reply, Petra's face broke into a brilliant smile, something that brought a great measure of peace to Subaru's mind.

—Enough to make Subaru firmly swear to his heart that this smiling face was one of the things he had to protect.

## 2

When Subaru returned to the front entrance, Petra was staring at him with her cheeks sourly puffed up.

There was not even a hint of the smiling face that Subaru had vowed to defend just under an hour before. With her red face and wet eyes projecting dissatisfaction with all their might, Subaru felt distinctly ashamed of himself.

"Petra, how long are you going to sulk like that? If you keep this up, you'll be causing trouble for Master Subaru, yes?"

"But—but, Miss Fredericaaa…"

“No buts. You heard what Master Subaru said. And yet, you are being unreasonable as a maid… No, the issue precedes being a maid. You understand, don’t you?”

“Uughu~~.”

Chided by Frederica, Petra hung her head in chagrin. He felt sorry for Petra as he watched her get a scolding, but Subaru knew that any intervention would only fan the flames. Though he felt bad about it, this was one point that Subaru could not yield, even if he had to become a demon in the process.

In the lounge, Subaru had proposed a plan to the pair based on his experiences from all the failed attempts he had made so far. The contents of that plan were the cause of Petra’s sour mood, for he had proposed that—

“—We shall leave the mansion empty, temporarily concealing ourselves in the village. That is what you require of us?”

“Yeah, I’m counting on you. Sorry for the unreasonable demands.”

“It was only just the other day we had the Witch Cult affair, so if that is your reasoning, then I cannot refute you.”

The basis behind Subaru’s plan made Frederica sullenly cast her eyes downward.

It had only been one short week since the Witch Cultists under Petelgeuse’s command had mounted an attack on the mansion and the village. The still-fresh memories and scars from what they had done were tremendously effective for persuading Petra and Frederica.

—His goal was to evacuate the pair from the mansion and distance them from Elsa’s imminent attack.

This was the strategy Subaru had decided on when he returned to the mansion with maximum possible speed. For the sake of persuasiveness, he’d explained that it was a precaution against Witch Cult remnants rather than assassins. For that reason, they would flee to the village not in maid outfits but outfits any village girl might wear, so as to conceal their connection to the mansion.

To be blunt, Petra notwithstanding, whether Frederica would do as he asked was a real gamble, but—

“—I cannot shirk this duty. After all, Master Subaru, you are entrusting me with your beloved dragon and a woman most

precious to you."

"…I really didn't mean to bring that up as a way to persuade you. I'm leaving them in your care because I trust you."

"My, such killer words. Master Subaru, you are truly skilled at tickling a maid's heart."

"I! I think that, too…!"

Petra raised her hands up, hopping as if declaring she was also present, drawing a pained smile from Subaru as he shifted his gaze to his arms—and to the sleeping face of the lovely girl he held within them.

Wearing thin blue pajamas over her upper body, it was the girl who continued to sleep without making even the slightest sound—Rem.

Subaru had picked her up from the bedroom in which she slumbered, carrying her all the way out of the mansion like that. She was no exception—

"Rem, Petra, Patlash—I'm entrusting them all to you, Frederica. I plan on rendezvousing with you as fast as possible, so…"

"I hope that you are able to come to terms with Lady Beatrice so that she might join us as well. —Truly, I do."

"…Yeah, me too."

Subaru replied to Frederica as his back teeth bit into his cheek.

When would he actually be able to fulfill that vow? Even Subaru did not know if it would be this time around or at some point in the future. But he would most certainly fulfill it. That he swore on his life.

Casting that vow into a future with no guarantees, Subaru hoped he could be forgiven for doing the best he could along the way.

"Could you cheer up for me, Petra? It's tough to be hated like this."

"*Muu*, in that case… Subaru, you said earlier that I saved you, right?"

As Subaru raised the proverbial white flag, the sulking Petra looked like she had suddenly recalled the thanks she had received earlier. When that elicited a nod from Subaru, she held a finger up and said, "Then, an expression of gratitude, please! I'll let you off in exchange for one *dayte*!"

"A date? Where the heck did you hear about…? Must be from that time with Emilia, huh? You really have a sharp memory,

Petra."

The adorable proposal made Subaru recall his first date with Emilia, his reward after the demon beast incident. At the time, they'd gone together from spot to spot around Earlham Village, meaning the villagers and the children had seen them. Apparently, Petra had remembered the word from way back then.

"Got it. If that'll do, then consider this escort job accepted. I'm honored to be Petra's first date, so I'm looking forward to it."

"Yes! It's a promise!"

Petra's face brightened with the appearance of a beaming smile, her foul mood seemingly forgotten.

That face offered nothing short of salvation. Through one girl's sympathy, it felt like even his failures could be swept away.

"Well, I'm going to go call Patlash over!"

Straightening her back with a spring, Petra energetically raced for the rear of the mansion. She seemed almost too worked up, but her consideration for others was probably a large part of that.

The astute girl had probably sensed that Subaru still had more to discuss with Frederica.

"…Let's make this promise again someday, Petra."

Watching the girl receding in the distance, Subaru whispered those words for his ears alone.

This was a world that would likely vanish. The promise they exchanged would not remain within her. However, Subaru would never forget.

—All so that they could make the same promise again when it was time to choose the correct future.

"She is a good girl, isn't she?"

"Yeah. Let me be the one to brag about her sometime, all right? I'm the one she chose for her first date after all."

After watching Petra head off, only Subaru and Frederica remained. With the exception of Rem, asleep in Subaru's arms, the two were alone—making this the ideal opportunity to speak openly.

Surmising what was to come, Frederica's body was slightly stiff as she reoriented herself toward Subaru. And then—

"I know you're about to set off and all, but can I ask you a—? Actually, make it three questions."

"That is incredibly sudden and exceedingly shameless of you. It would depend upon the specifics."

Adjusting how he held Rem while he broached the subject,

Frederica knitted her brows. There was a twinge of unease that came over her jade eyes. For a time, Subaru mulled over just what he ought to probe at before he finally asked, “I want to ask about Garfiel. He’s been inside the tomb. Did you know?”

“—. Is there something between you and Garfiel?”

“You’re the one who warned me to watch out. Harsh words, you know? I know about your relation to Garfiel, too. That’s why you don’t have to cover anything up.”

“In but a single…really, in half a day, you would seem to have gained a great deal of the master’s trust.”

Gazing in wonder at the breadth of Subaru’s knowledge, Frederica voiced that conclusion as if speaking to herself. She apparently thought that Subaru had obtained the information from Roswaal, something he made no effort to correct.

—After all, information nigh impossible to learn in a single day was a weapon Subaru and Subaru alone wielded.

Using that as leverage, Subaru wanted to discover Garfiel’s true intentions, an irreplaceable piece of information for him to devise a way to clear Sanctuary.

Given the fact that he had the qualifications to be an apostle, his bias toward the Trial, and the slight measure of sympathy he had shown Emilia as she challenged the tomb, there was no mistaking that Garfiel bore special feelings toward that tomb.

If this was the core component of the differences in his actions from each of Subaru’s runs, then that was how he would unravel the thread.

“Did you hear anything about me from…my little brother?”

“…I don’t really want to say this, Frederica, but most of it was bad. Garfiel said that you abandoned your birthplace and left.”

“

gap has remained unbridged ever since."

"…Frederica, is it all right if I asked why you left the Sanctuary?"

He already knew the reason why she was not held captive by the barrier enveloping the Sanctuary. The barrier, which bound those who carried mixed human and demi-human blood, did not activate if that mixture was too weak.

She was not a half-blood but a quarter. This was the reason Frederica could leave the Sanctuary.

"Still, being able to leave and leaving are two different things. I tried asking Garfiel what he wanted to do after the barrier was lifted, too…but he didn't answer."

"I…see. I probably wanted to create that for him."

Subaru put on a puzzled look when he heard the vague explanation, one focused around the word *that*. Not noticing his reaction, Frederica seemed to be trying to coax an answer out of something amorphous that rested deep inside of her.

"Someday, the barrier will be lifted. I was absolutely certain of that. Perhaps that was simply wishful thinking on my part. If the barrier was lifted finally, the people living inside the Sanctuary would be freed…and they would come outside, having no more idea what to do than Garfiel does right now."

"So you wanted to create that 'something' for them, Frederica?"

"Close. It is very much like that. A place for them, perhaps—something to give courage to those dependent on the Sanctuary, a spark for them to step outside."

Frederica seemed satisfied with this explanation as she touched a hand to her chest. Subaru had never seen her act this way, like a bud gently blooming into a flower.

The people dependent on the Sanctuary were those with nowhere else to go due to irrational ostracism and discrimination. When the barrier was lifted and even the Sanctuary was lost to them, where would they go?

—To answer that question, Frederica had been working toward a new place they could call home.

With such conviction roaring inside of her, an earnest light shined in Frederica's jade eyes. Coming back to Subaru's question, "As far as the tomb is concerned," she offered as a preamble, before saying, "to the best of my knowledge, Garf entered the tomb only once. If he took the Trial, it could only be then… I do not know

whether he challenged it again thereafter."

"So what was the result at the time? I imagine that he failed, but…"

Shaking her head, Frederica had a grave look on her face.

"At the time, I was unable to rush into the tomb after him. Grandmother simply told me that Garf had not returned, and it was Grandmother who entered the tomb and brought him back…"

"So Ryuzu is the one who brought Garfiel back, huh?"

The natives of the Sanctuary could not lift the barrier. Ryuzu had previously told him that she was bound to the place by a pact. For that same Ryuzu to enter the tomb was akin to defying the Witch's commands.

Considering the circumstances of Ryuzu's birth as a replica, this was truly on par with an act of rebellion against her creator.

Small wonder, then, that Garfiel revered Ryuzu, who had gone that far to rescue him and thought of the Sanctuary as a precious place.

But for the result of that trial to be Garfiel becoming an Apostle of Greed, he had to have wanted something.

"When she returned, Grandmother kept their trip to the tomb a secret. And ever since, Garf stopped saying he was going to enter the tomb. He'd said he was going to liberate the Sanctuary by his own hand and show Grandmother and the others the outside world."

From Frederica's lonely words, Subaru realized a truth that she herself had not.

Frederica had departed the Sanctuary in order to build a new home in anticipation of the day liberation would come. She was waiting. —Waiting for the time when Garfiel would free the people of the Sanctuary.

Frederica had ventured to the outside world to support the hope her younger brother once embraced—

And yet, that hope had been dashed midway, and now Garfiel took great pains to protect the Sanctuary.

So that's what it was. This was the true motive behind Garfiel's actions. Grieving for a future he could no longer see, he protected the present instead. This explained the apparent contradictions in his actions to date.

"—Master Subaru, I ask that you somehow take good care of my uncouth younger brother."

“…Even if you say that to me, there’s not much I can do.”

As Subaru sank into thought, Frederica bent deeply at the hip as she made her request. Subaru was at a loss for how to respond. But Frederica slowly shook her head side to side and smiled.

Making no attempts to hide her mouth and leaving her sharp fangs on display, her beaming face was beautiful enough to captivate him—

“Master Subaru, the reason I ask is because I now believe you are up to the task. I will have you know, I have some confidence in my ability to read people.”

Frederica’s statement, somehow coming off as playful, made Subaru avert his gaze. He wanted to answer her expectations. But could he really say he was prepared to fulfill them this time around?

It was because he had no such conviction that Subaru could not bear to meet her gaze and hesitated in his reply.

“I humbly ask that you take good care of my younger brother.”

Even so, it was this Subaru with whom Frederica spoke once more, repeating her request with a smile still on her face.

“Master Subaru, please allow me to take Rem. Your arms must be at their limits?”

“…Yeah, actually I’ve been really been pushing it. It’s not like I can afford to just drop her, after all.”

Frederica opened her arms, which also signaled the end of the conversation. Indulging in her benevolence, Subaru handed over the sleeping Rem. He had heard once unconscious people were supposed to be far harder to lift than anyone who was awake, but her body didn’t feel heavy to him. It was as if having her name and memory stolen away had left her diluted, almost like she was going to fade away.

“

next move would be.

How did he plan to find Beatrice, presumably in the archive of forbidden books even at that very moment, and bring her out with him?

"If she really wants to hide, there's no way I'll find her no matter what plan I come up with."

"Then what shall you do? It is necessary for Master Subaru to meet with Lady Beatrice, after all."

"I told you. That's if she really *wants* to hide."

As Subaru repeated himself, the Frederica's arched in doubt. Faced with her questioning gaze, Subaru finally pulled his fingers away from Rem and turned back toward the palatial building.

It was a big, overly broad manor. Beatrice had as many hiding places as it had doors. But—

"There's no one who plays hide-and-seek who doesn't wanna be found. I always find her because she's hiding with the hope that someone will find her."

And it was probably that single loophole that tied Subaru and Beatrice together.

"Take care of Rem, Petra, Patlash, and yourself too, okay?"

With that, Subaru bid Frederica farewell one last time. In response, Frederica, with Rem still in her arms, bowed respectfully.

**3**

The instant he touched the doorknob, Subaru wore a pained smile as he had the sense that he'd grasped "correctly."

After all, once seeing Frederica and company off, he returned to the mansion, did a few light stretches, and walked off to search for Beatrice, whereupon the first door he selected was a bingo.

If the words he had exchanged with Frederica at the entrance were true, this game of hide-and-seek was rigged.

To begin with, the timing of just when she began that game of hide-and-seek would greatly alter how he interpreted this series of events.

To find out for certain, Subaru took a breath and twisted the doorknob—

"—You finally showed up, I suppose?"

Alongside that single phrase greeting came a current of air mixed with the unmistakable musk of old books.

That unsociable tone of voice, that grumpy way of speaking—hearing that Subaru instinctually release the tension in his shoulders. The worries that hounded him just moments before, the travails he had endured up to that point—for a brief moment, he was able to forgot them as he raised a hand in greeting.

"Heya, Beako. Haven't seen your face in a while, but you haven't changed one bit."

"It has only been three days, and yet somehow the way your flippant tongue irritates me has not changed at all, either."

It was the mistress of the archive of forbidden books and its rows of bookshelves who responded. At the center of the room, surrounded by those old books, a young girl was sitting on a wooden stool with her cheek resting upon her palm—Beatrice.

While gazing at her, Subaru abruptly realized that she was always sitting on that stool. The Archive had proper desks and tables. And yet, she was always there, ready to receive guests.

That was how she was when Subaru first met her, and the numerous, many times Subaru had visited since—

"…Could you cease and desist with that unpleasant gaze, I wonder? There is no reason for you to look at Betty with such eyes."

"If you're talking about my mean mug, then unfortunately the same one I was born with. I hate to admit that, but I've got no intention of getting a replacement now. Putting that aside… I came here today with a different reason in mind than all the other times before."

Subaru's words heavily implied the reams of information he'd gained about Beatrice during that loop. And it was she herself who had told Subaru that if he wanted to understand, he ought to change places and obtain that knowledge in the Sanctuary.

In fact, Subaru had learned why Beatrice continued to obsess over the archive of forbidden books and about the magical tome she possessed. He would not claim that he had discovered everything there was to know about her. But it was still enough to be a thread he could follow.

Subaru's gaze, imbued with determination, made Beatrice's cheeks stiffen slightly.

"…In the Sanctuary, did you find out, I wonder?"

"If you're asking just how much I know, that's hard to say. I learned a bit, but definitely not everything. I'm using the power of

guesswork to fill in the parts I don't have."

"Then do as you please… It is an ironic idea either way, I suppose."

She let out a sigh, and right after, Beatrice's expression abruptly relaxed.

When she took off her mask of obstinacy, what rested beneath was the gentle, charming smile she was born with and a forlorn blue glimmer in her eyes—the sight unwittingly left Subaru at a loss for words.

Her fleeting, fragile beauty left him unable to draw in his breath. That charming smile was just too lonely—

"The long, long pact is coming to an end. —This time, the end of the end shall come to an end, and Betty can finally be freed from stagnation. Though I must say—"

Cutting off her words there, Beatrice's eyes narrowed teasingly as she continued, "…For Betty, having you be the one to do it is an exceptionally ironic conclusion, I suppose?"

## 4

Mesmerized by her words and her charming smile, Subaru blinked hard for a moment to regain his bearings.

"Ironic…ironic, huh? I guess being able to talk like you know it all is another benefit of your precious book?"

Beatrice's charming smile and the annoyance he felt made Subaru a tiny bit aggressive.

When he sent a glance her way, Beatrice sighed deeply and sent a hand behind her stool, and from there, pulled out a single tome—a black-bound book of knowledge—and held it against her chest.

Such a book of prophecies recorded the possessor's future and guided that possessor to a better path—Beatrice's fingers grasped this book, what Roswaal had described as falling somewhere short of a truly complete product.

Indeed, the girl had said to him that her actions to date had been in accordance to what was written in that book.

Having saved Subaru, smiling with him in the mansion, stubbornly continuing to say this was her own place—everything was as recorded in the book. However—

"If everything was according to the book, your own will had nothing to do with it. That's what you're saying, right?"

“…So many questions. If you know about this book, no explanation should be necessary.”

“I told you, I’m filling in the gaps with guesswork. You and Roswaal hide way too much stuff. That’s why it’s been such a pain in the rear to bring you out of here.”

“Bring me out…?”

Beatrice’s murmur bore the echo of her having heard an unexpected phrase. Receiving this, Subaru said, “That’s right, I’ve come to bring you out of this archive of forbidden books. We can call it a temporary evacuation but…if I’m being honest, I don’t wanna bring you back here. This place, it’s unhealthy.”

“Wh…what do you think you are saying, I wonder? Bring me out of here? What self-serving…!”

“Your face says this wasn’t what you had in mind. Isn’t everything I do written in that book of yours?”

Pointing at the book, Subaru posed the question to the unnerved Beatrice. His assertion sent the girl’s face flying into shock, her fingers trembling as she opened the book and flipped through its pages.

As if clinging to the book, as if trying to reel the future in, her big eyes were filled with gloom as she flipped the pages.

“Why…?”

The girl’s attitude toward the conduct Subaru himself had pointed out rubbed him in a very bad way. Perhaps it was irrational of him. And yet, a smudge of anger welled up within his chest.

In the blink of an eye, the instantaneous relief he felt when he got his wish for a reunion with Beatrice was blotted out.

“Why are you clinging to that book? That’s not something you need to do.”

“

“—Ah.”

Stomping his feet, Subaru stood in front of Beatrice. When his shadow was cast over the open book, Beatrice looked up, realizing for the first time that Subaru was standing right next to her.

Subaru felt anger at the sight of himself reflected in her pupils. He had the face of a child abandoned by his parents. It was both Subaru and the actions of the girl bound by the book that had left him with that expression.

If that pensive face, that sullen face, that frail, fleeting face, if any and all of those things had been recorded in the book, then where was the girl Subaru had been meeting until now?

—What face did the girl named Beatrice truly make?

“Gimme that—!”

*“Ah…!”*

Extending his arm, he seized the magic tome Beatrice was clutching by force. Instantly, she attempted to resist, but her trembling fingers had no strength in them, and Subaru easily tore the book away from her.

It was lighter than he had expected. That fact, too, irritated him. A single tome this light had cast such a dark shadow over Beatrice’s entire way of life? Just how much power did the notations within possess?

And how much of Beatrice’s actions, words, emotions, were all done according to the book—

“—Eh?”

Grasping the book he had torn away, he violently flipped the pages with his fingers. His eyes ran across the contents to read what was written therein. In so doing, he meant to discover Beatrice’s true thoughts.

And yet, Subaru gazed in blank astonishment as his eyes leaped across the book’s interior.

There was nothing written on the page he had opened. He flipped the page. There was nothing on the back side, either. He flipped the page. Flip. Flip. Flip, flip, flip as he might…

There was not a single sentence or even a single character on so much as a single page. It was blank pages with nothing written on them over and over—

“—It has been like that for a long time now.”

Addressing the bewildered Subaru, whose eyes were bulging in surprise, Beatrice murmured almost as if uttering a soliloquy. With

the book stolen from her two hands, the girl used them to cover her face instead, so that Subaru would not see the expression now resting upon it.

With nothing more than a broken voice, she put her withered emotions to her tongue and continued.

“It has been many years since that book has shown Betty’s future…”

Pulling her knees close, Beatrice curled up and shrank atop of the stool. Realizing that was a posture that would not yield to interference, Subaru endured his impatience and waited for her next words.

From this halting silence, Beatrice began her confession with a lecture on her duties as a librarian.

It was a lecture about the true nature of the archive of forbidden books and unraveled the history behind it.

“The role granted to Betty is to maintain and preserve this archive of knowledge, to continue and protect this place until the time we shall someday be reunited… I suppose?”

“Archive of knowledge…”

Standing up, Subaru surveyed the array of bookshelves that entombed the room. His legs had brought him to this place many times over, and a great many times his eyes had perused a number of the books found within. It was from this that Subaru knew that the archive contained a huge variety of books, including texts that even he could understand and most likely various types containing forbidden knowledge as well.

This collection was impossibly vast, lacking rhyme or reason, almost as if books of any and every type had been stuffed into the place.

“It was established by someone who loved storing knowledge above all else.”

The murmur was full of fondness, of cherishing, of yearning.

It was those words trickling out of Beatrice that made the image of someone Subaru knew float up into his mind.

“…I had a vague suspicion…ever since I found out that Roswaal was connected to that Witch.”

The first clue was the administration of the Sanctuary, passed down through the Roswaal family generation after generation. Roswaal had said this was a role entrusted to them by the Witch. Based on his extraordinary obsession with the Witch and his

behavior to date, Subaru had somehow managed to guess.

There was a spirit in that very Roswaal's mansion, one who had come to dwell there long ago. There was no pact between Roswaal and this spirit. This, too, was something Roswaal had openly declared.

Who, then, had been at that mansion and made a contract with the spirit to protect the archive of forbidden books?

"Beatrice. You're—Echidna's contracted spirit."

"

by letting Subaru be close to her when the tragedy at the mansion drove nails into his heart, by cooperating with the investigation into the cause of his curse—Beatrice had saved Subaru many times over.

He believed that all that was unrelated to what was written in the book, and so, too, the days of fun they had spent thereafter—

"Without any relation to the book, you…"

"—Did I not tell you last time, I wonder?"

As Subaru's voice broached the subject of gentler things, seemingly clinging to hope, Beatrice interrupted.

Her voice did not tremble. In front of Subaru, his breath catching as she interrupted him, Beatrice slowly lowered the hands covering her face—and what emerged was emotionless, like a Noh mask.

Her face, unfeeling like something completely artificial, made Subaru shudder, gripped by a strange sensation. For some reason, the impression she gave off at that moment was like the Ryuzu replicas—the same as that of a copy.

As Subaru's lips twisted in horror, Beatrice remained expressionless as she continued.

"Someday, That Person will come to the archive. Betty was told her duty is to wait until then."

"…!! For That Person you said?"

The term that suddenly leaped into his eardrums made Subaru open his eyes wide in astonishment. *That Person*, the words Subaru had heard several times over during that loop—Roswaal had told him to say those words to Beatrice, as if it was a deeply suggestive term.

Having missed his opportunities to say it himself to Beatrice, some twist of fate had made him hear those words from Beatrice herself, leaving Subaru bewildered.

Beatrice, interpreting his confusion as a sign that he simply didn't know what she meant, explained further.

"It is as I said. Betty is to continue to protect the archive of forbidden books until That Person appears. It is Betty's duty to protect the stored knowledge so it may be handed to That Person, I suppose."

The complicated emotions with which Betty spoke of That Person stabbed him in the chest. The tone of her voice was complex, at once full of loveliness, hatred, impatience, resentment, and exhaustion.

Those reverberations made Subaru stuff his heart full of hateful words toward Roswaal, who had so lightly told Subaru to bring up That Person to her.

And more than that, he could not fail to sense an ominous disquiet in Beatrice's demeanor.

"Someday, someone will fulfill the promise of the archive of forbidden books. Betty has always awaited the day That Person would arrive as written in the book."

"Wait, Beatrice. Calm down a little. You and I are both too worked up. Let's calm down a bit, and—"

"But That Person never came. Nor will the book say who That Person is. And so time has passed, and so too much time has passed, and that is why…"

He couldn't let her say any more. Even though he was certain of this, the words refused to come out.

What should he say that she might not speak the words? If he said the wrong thing, there would be no stopping her. He didn't know what the correct answer was. Hence, all that trickled out was a broken breath.

"I do not care if you are not That Person. I shall bear it if it must be you. —Are you the one who shall end Betty, who shall bring an end to the pact, who shall take this life, I wonder?"

This was Beatrice's desire. Her earnest wish was for a way to end the end of the end.

"

“If the only way to do that is taking your life, how is that different from wanting to die?!!”

Subaru wrung his voice out at the girl who refused to understand. He was shouting in anger. He slammed the magic tome in his grasp onto the floor. Just like that, the blow unraveled the old tome. Its blank pages fluttered and danced within the archive.

Blank pages scattered, flitting back and forth in the space between Subaru and Beatrice. Sweeping them away with an arm, he howled.

“You wanna die? Cut the crap! Saying you wanna die… Even if others would let you say it, I… That’s the one thing I won’t let anyone say in front of me!”

If you died, your life could not be brought back. That was an iron rule. That alone was absolutely inviolable.

Only Subaru Natsuki was different. That was why there was value in him and him alone casting away his life. Even if he died, it had meaning, something he had been able to demonstrate with tangible proof.

Beatrice was different. Everyone else was different. This was something he absolutely could not allow.

“That is a very self-serving thing of you to say. —What do you understand about Betty, I wonder?”

However, her reply to his irritation was so very cold, as sharp as any blade.

Spreading her skirt, Beatrice set her feet onto the stool and hopped onto the floor. Then she gestured toward the archive with a hand.

“Betty has spent many years here, obeying the pact…four hundred years.”

“Four hundred years…”

*That phrase again*, thought Subaru, grimacing. He felt tempted to click his tongue.

Many of that world’s important historical events were clumped up together four hundred years prior. That had been the era of the Witch, the end of destruction and the beginning of prosperity, the patronage of the kingdom, the contempt for half-demons—it was an abominable era that was responsible for the fates of so many.

Beatrice, too, was born in that era and had lived since then until the present day.

“Obeying the pact, I lived under the same roof as the Mathers

family, who stood in the same position as I, spending my days in accordance to what was written in the magic tome. I would hardly consider those first several decades to be suffering at all, I suppose."

Subaru felt a chill as he listened to her voice and the grandness of the details she spoke of.

"But even during that time, the world shifted. The first Roswaal that Betty knew passed away, and the next generation inherited the duty. Betty has been watching this act of replacement the whole time."

The girl explained calmly. This reflected the blandness of the passage of time, the frayed nature of the reality she had experienced.

"I waited day after day for That Person who was supposed to come someday…but was I at all anxious, I wonder? After all, Betty had the book. As long as she trusted and waited, as long as there were amended pages, then surely, one day."

"But that's…"

The remains of the magic tome were scattered all over the floor. Subaru knew that from Beatrice's perspective what was written on those blank pages was very cruel indeed. To Beatrice, that whiteness denoted despair.

At some point, the book of knowledge, which to her was a symbol of hope—

"No matter how many times I checked each and every day, there was no change in the text… The span of time until I became certain was incredibly trying."

"

—Wounds he had unreservedly, rudely, thoughtlessly gouged into her, over and over, never healed and were still oozing blood.

"As I spent my time like that, I realized… No, perhaps I knew it all along?"

"Realized what?"

Knowing of her suffering, knowing that he had added to her wounds, his voice trembled.

And as his own sins tore at his chest, Beatrice softly smiled.

It was a forlorn, frail smile, just like when she had stated she wanted someone to end it all.

"—When no more is written in the book, it means that the owner's future has come to an end."

"You're wrong…!"

The fitful denial that flew out never reached Beatrice. It simply bounced right off her immovable, resigned heart. A baseless emotional argument was not what she sought. She wasn't looking for someone to console her either. The answer to her question had already come out from inside her. Out it came, into the open.

"Why…do you have to…?!"

Even so, Subaru's emotions would not permit it. He refuted Beatrice's surrender, her desire for death.

"So you came to a conclusion all by yourself!! This is what happens to everyone when they're worried and mull things over all by their lonesome! That's when things go in bad directions, just like this! You start thinking, *This is the only way*, and you agonize over that thought… That's when you think the only road in front of you is the worst one possible!"

Because he was Subaru, someone who'd railed against his own powerlessness as he threw himself against hardship over and over, he understood.

A senseless destiny pushed people into isolation. And with the compulsion to continue to stand and face it alone, black fingers would entwine around any heart fighting that lonely battle.

But that was a rule that didn't need to be followed. He wanted to convey that to her.

If only he could return to Beatrice the power of the similar words she had once spoken to him, Subaru could—

"If what you want is someone to do something to help, say it so people can understand. One sentence is enough. Say that you're sad. Say that you want help. If you can say that…even I…!"

If she did that, surely she would notice. —There was no need to give up at all.

“A whole bunch of times, you… That’s why this time I’ll…!”

“…Do something to help?”

“That’s it… Call out for help, just like that.”

“Do something to help…”

“That’s it! That’s it, that’s it, that’s it! If you say that and reach out with your hand…”

“Betty, wants to be saved from this…sadness, this suffering… this darkness…”

“Yeah, leave it to me. I’ll—”

Her tiny, shaking fingers reached out toward Subaru. He reached a hand out toward hers.

His blood was rushing to his head. That moment, all he wanted to do was to embrace the girl before his eyes, to shower her with kindness. That moment, Subaru had completely forgotten the reason he came for a visit to begin with.

But that was for the best. Thanks to that, he had discovered this girl tormented by loneliness. Then and there, Subaru was being driven solely by the burning sense of duty residing in his chest.

If he took her hand, Subaru would be accepting another weighty burden. He didn’t care. Beatrice was someone he could not abandon to begin with. All he had done was confirm that in his heart.

His soul was shouting as loud as it could. And Subaru simply obeyed its call.

*Save her. Rescue her. After all, that girl is*

not let him.

“

could get a word in. It was that or nothing.

And yet, Subaru hesitated out of fear. Afraid of hurting her, he said nothing.

Beatrice lifted her face. She was glaring at him. She opened her mouth, baring her teeth—

“—Why did you leave Betty alone for four hundred years?!”

“

smile as she said,

“Half-hearted resolve cannot erase the pact that binds Betty. It is impossible for mere *humans*.”

“What should I…?”

“—Make Betty number one.”

The words tossed his way were so very quiet and yet so very sharp.

Subaru felt like fine needles had been thrust through his eardrums, sending a blow shooting right through him.

“Make, Betty your number one. Think of Betty first. Choose Betty first. Overwrite the pact. Blot out the pact. Bring me out of here. Draw me to you. Embrace me.”

“

first role I was granted in this life. Selfishly cast this aside and live… That is what you are telling me to do?"

"It's not selfish at all, damn it! You've already hung in there for four centuries!! Who'd blame you after you protected a single promise for all that time! Who could?! You've done enough…"

"No one would blame? That is not so… Betty would! Betty absolutely cannot permit it! Beatrice the spirit cannot permit such a haphazard way of life!!"

Stepping forward with a trembling foot, Subaru attempted to grasp the little girl's shoulder. But Beatrice angrily rebuffed his attempt, thrusting his touch aside and putting distance between them.

He stepped back and coughed. He felt weak. What meaning was there in having a voice if it could not reach her?

"

“Why are you entrusting me with your final—your four centuries’ final end…?”

“Why…I wonder?”

They were tearful words. They were words making excuses, evasive words merely spoken to block things he disliked out of his ears.

Beatrice did not scorn Subaru for his cowardice. She simply sighed.

Then, after a momentary pause, she slowly nodded and said, “—Ahhh, I understand now. Betty is probably entrusting you with her final moment because…”

Once he heard the answer, there was no going back. —He was certain of it.

And yet, his decision came too late. He had realized too late. It was too late for everything.

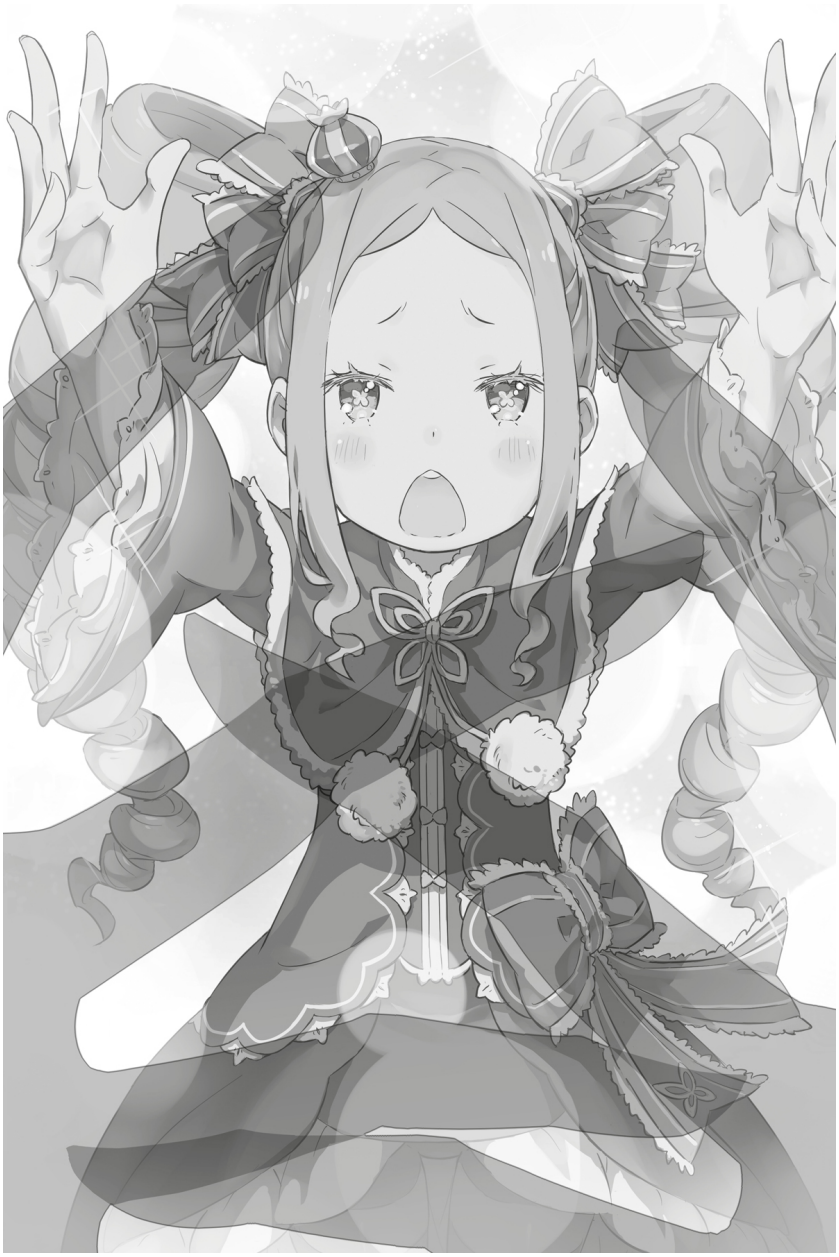
“—Sorry to intrude mid-conversation, but…”

A voice he should not have heard spoke. Hastened by a terrible chill, Subaru flipped around.

Then he saw her.

“—Is it all right if I become That Person for you, I wonder?”

Carrying a black curved blade in her hand—a kukri knife—the black-clothed Bowel Hunter stood at the archive’s entrance.



## 5

To Subaru, the voice of the woman he heard behind him was the backing track to his very first death.

Since being summoned to that other world, Subaru had experienced a great many perils, sometimes losing his life to them, but that black-clothed woman's existence remained a symbol of death to him nonetheless.

Wearing a black mantle, clad in an outfit unsparingly exposing her curvaceous physique, her black hair, as rare in that world as Subaru's own, tied in a triple knot, the woman had a lustrous, sensuous beauty to her that far exceeded the norm.

—There stood Elsa Gramhilde, aka the "Bowel Hunter."

"—Oh my, so you were here, too. So tell me, how did your body fare after *that*? Did the insides of your belly get all prettied up again?"

Noticing Subaru, frozen from shock, Elsa slightly opened her eyes wider and tilted her head, almost like greeting an old friend.

She posed that question, but from the beginning, she had not come in order to hold a conversation. Speaking and acting in ways no normal person could understand, the person before his eyes, speaking things like that as if they made perfect sense, was a dyed-in-the-wool madwoman.

"—Whose permission did you obtain to step into this archive, I wonder?"

As Subaru stood rooted to the spot, a voice abruptly slipped past his flank, aiming the question directly at Elsa.

It was Beatrice, with cold hostility trained upon the insolent intruder. Her posture remained the same as when she had confronted Subaru earlier, but she was glaring at the trespasser without the slightest hint of tears on her face.

Elsa responded to the girl's question while slowly stroking her own long hair.

"It wasn't locked, so all I did was open the door and come in. If you want to have an important conversation, I think you really should remember to lock the door first…"

"Such a frivolous reply… This is Betty's archive of forbidden

books. None may enter without permission."

"Ahhh, that is what you mean. It is quite simple, really."

When Beatrice questioned her further, Elsa nodded as if finally understanding the meaning of the question. Then she indicated the still-open door with her hand as she explained.

"Your magic to isolate a space…it uses doors as catalysts, yes? Now-lost Dark magic that links doors to other doors, was it?"

"…That is correct, I suppose. But just because you know that…"

"Oh my, once you understand that, it's quite simple. When facing magic that affects closed doors…as long as I go ahead and open every last door, I eliminate all your options, don't I?"

"—?!"

Elsa indicated a very simple method indeed for breaking Beatrice's Passage spell. Those words made Beatrice eyes go wide, unshakable proof that this was the correct answer.

Simultaneously, Subaru realized that this was the reason for the inexplicable sight he saw earlier in the loop—when he discovered all the doors in the mansion flung open.

That was not a ransacking—a violent means of searching every nook and cranny for people within the mansion—but the vestiges of a search completely and solely devoted to finding Beatrice.

"I told you, yes? It's a very simple matter. It did take a little time, so I'm rather relieved to have finally found you. —I'm truly glad to have reached you before Meili returns from the village."

"—Village? You said 'village' just now?"

As Elsa patted her chest in relief, words rolled out of her mouth that Subaru could not ignore.

She said "village" and a person's name. Meili—Subaru remembered that name. He was sure it was the same name Elsa had mentioned when appearing at the mansion on a previous run.

Considering the situation, it was probably the Beast Master attacking the mansion with her at the time—

"What's that Beast Master doing at the village…?!"

"Well, of course she went there; her targets fled into the village after all. When you're hired to do something, it's only right and proper that you do your utmost to achieve optimal results, yes? So we divided our labor."

"Div…ided…?"

"You may have the advantage in quantity, but I have the advantage in quality. Most of all, I have been granted an

opportunity to open a spirit's belly. I've always wanted to try that."

As she spoke, Elsa licked her lips. Taking in the meaning of her words, Subaru felt the fact that his judgment had been fundamentally mistaken plunging into him like a stake.

His plan to have Rem, Petra, and Frederica take shelter in the village had failed.

Now he knew that Elsa and her allies would continue chasing after their targets even if they were no longer at the mansion. No matter how soon Subaru acted, the scent of blood would be invariably reach the archive of forbidden books, just like this—

"—Shielding this child, are you?"

"Damn right."

Changing where he stood, Subaru stood right in front of Elsa, as if to shield Beatrice behind his back. If Elsa's target was Beatrice, there was no way he could allow that wicked blade to reach her.

Besides, he couldn't leave the village as it was, either. The Beast Master was doing something at the village. If he raced there that very moment… *No, idiot! The enemy's standing right in front of you.*.. But over there, death was closing in on the village, on Rem—

"…For you to do such a thing, preoccupied as you are with idle thoughts, is nothing but a nuisance. If you will not do it, does Betty really mind if it comes by her hand, I wonder?"

"Shut the hell up. I told you what my answer is. I'm dragging you out of here."

"More importantly, how about the two of you spend your final moments together, exposing your bellies to me like good, obedient children?"

With despair written all over Beatrice's downcast face, Subaru made an urgent plea to her. Elsa offered a totally unwelcome suggestion, but he had no time to deal with that.

He inched back, moving toward Beatrice. Simultaneously, Elsa advanced.

His brow steadily grew hotter, the heat increasing gradually like the quickening beats of his heart—

"You get along so well. I'm so jealous. —I'll make sure to pose you side by side like little angels."

Elsa stretched a thin smile over her lips, and the next instant, she lowered her stance and shot forward like an arrow. Using the momentum, she moved toward the pair in the archive of forbidden books with her first step; by the second step, she was already

closing the gap in the blink of an eye; and by step three—

"—!"

His eyes could not keep up with her speed. Subaru's thoughts coalesced into an instant decision even faster than that. He'd decided that if he met Elsa, he *had* to use it. Once again, he chose to use—

"Sha— "—Shamak!""

—With simultaneous chants, darkness suddenly sprung out of the thin air.

Ceaselessly pouring out, the shadowy murk swept across the archive, obscuring everything in a field of incomprehension. The bookshelves, the stool, and the onrushing butcher were no exception.

If exceptions had to be named, they would be—

"—! Come on, Beatrice!"

Instantly, Subaru, an exception to the magic's effects, clenched his teeth as he grasped the arm of the girl who had been chanting—Beatrice—sweeping her light body into his arms as he ran straight ahead. There was darkness woven by magic before his eyes. However, he leaped into the gap on the left that he had intentionally created—slipping past the butcher.

He'd already confirmed that Shamak was effective on Elsa. With Elsa trapped for the moment in a sea of incomprehension, he left her behind as he fled out of the butcher's range as fast as he could.

"…Let go of me."

"Just be quiet! If you seriously wanted me to, you wouldn't have done *that*!"

As he held Beatrice in his arms, he smothered her words of rejection from above.

Subaru had tried to abuse his incomplete Gate to chant a spell to drive Elsa off. It was Beatrice who had interrupted midway, activating her spell on a scale incomparable to what Subaru was capable of.

With the same tongue that had said, "I want to die; leave me be," she had taken action so that someone might live. He wondered exactly who the chant was meant to keep alive—

"

For in that moment, he thought, it was enough.

"Beatrice! How long will Shamak hold her?!"

"Not for very long, I suppose. It was never particularly effective magic to begin with… What will you do?"

"What'll I do? What'll I do? It's obvious what I'm gonna do!"

He practically tumbled as he raced out of the archive. The place he emerged into was a corridor on the first floor of the mansion's main wing. Fortunately, the front entrance hall was close by. From there, he would head outside and rush toward Earlham Village—

"Is it all right to leave that woman in black, I wonder?"

"We don't have time to mess around with her! It'll take awhile for her to bust out of Shamak. Right now, we've gotta—"

Beatrice's words went in one ear and out the other. Adjusting his grip on the girl he carried, Subaru sprinted with all his strength.

At any rate, that moment, he had to get to Earlham Village.

With unease still racing through him, Subaru's breathed hard as he desperately, desperately ran.

—For he had seen the black plume of smoke hovering over the landscape on the other side of the windows.

## 6

Rushing past the front gate, Subaru continued to run down the street, riding his ragged breaths.

*"Haaah, haah, haah*

“That is nothing as lofty as hope. Is it merely regret or avoidance of reality, I wonder?”

The heartless words Beatrice murmured from so close he could feel her breathe pierced his brain—no, the thrust had come from reality.

Forcing his eyes open, he gazed upon the rising black plume in the distance. Ironically, as he had gone back in time on multiple occasions, it was now a very familiar sight.

This was proof. That very moment, a tragedy that could not be undone was taking place beneath that plume of black smoke.

“And even if we could do something, Betty is already…”

Those words, foretelling the end, made Subaru’s head heavy with anger and sadness.

Was this anger directed at Beatrice for holding her life in such contempt? Was this sadness directed at himself, the fool who had failed despite so many opportunities? He no longer knew which.

What was right, what was wrong? Subaru knew where he had gone wrong. Therefore, what he craved was an answer as to how he might be right.

As for what he wanted to do by confirming what rested beneath that black plume of smoke, that was already—

“—Huhhh? What are the two of you doing in a place like this, Mister…?”

“

“Oh, Elsa, so sloppy of you to let someone escape. Let me guess, she was all overconfident and careless again, like usual?”

“You’re… Wait, you’re that…”

“—? Ahhh, maybe you don’t recognize me. I had my hair dyed a different color before.”

Bewildered, Subaru came to a halt and all the exhaustion he had been ignoring came rushing back all at once. However, Subaru forced it down with long breaths, focusing his mind on the little girl before him.

The girl toyed with her triple braid, performing a pirouette that made her black mantle flutter as she said, “That day, it was a lot of fun when we played together. Let’s play some more today, shall we?”

“Th-the Beast Master…!!”

“Meili Portroute. There’s no need to call me an uncharming name like that.”

The girl—the Beast Master—introduced herself as Meili, drawing her lips in as she visibly pouted. It was precisely because the gesture was so childish and innocent that it was all the more frightening to behold.

Behind the girl’s adorable gesture loomed the plume of black smoke, proof that a tragedy had occurred. There was no mistaking that the little girl before his eyes was the very cause of that tragedy.

“You’re…a monster just like Elsa!! What did you do to the village…to Rem and the others?!”

“Errm, I don’t know which one was this Rem person, but I’m very passionate about my work, so I always make sure to complete the task I’ve been assigned. Namely the big maid and the little maid from the mansion—it’s too bad the little maid turned out to be Petra, though…”

“Too bad? What do you mean, too bad? Too bad, too bad… Wh-what have you done…?”

“It’s all right; she was a friend of mine you know. So I made sure it was settled with one bite so she wouldn’t feel the pain…”

Putting her hands together, Meili nodded, smiling as she spoke as if this was her idea of mercy.

“—Ah.”

Learning from this report that the girl he had exchanged the promise of a date with had already met her end drained the strength from his knees.

Before he realized it, Subaru had crumpled to the ground, sinking down to his knees in bewilderment.

“

Beatrice had even pointed out he was avoiding reality, but even so, Subaru had stubbornly made his way toward the village, if only to scrounge one extra second before he was forced to gaze directly at cruel reality.

He'd pretended to see a glimmer of hope, but that was only his miserable self-defense instincts at work.

"…What a buffoon you are. If you were going to give up in the end, should you have resisted to begin with, I wonder?"

"

glint of annoyance.

“I really hate it when a plan goes sideways, you see. Thanks to Miss Big Maid bringing the others along, I’m well behind schedule as it is, and I don’t want to fall behind any further—”

“How terrible for you. Incidentally, regardless of how much time you save, the likes of you cannot…”

“—That’s why I’m going to stick with the division of labor and leave you to my partner…”

Tilting her little head, a cruel flicker remained in Meili’s eyes as she stated those words to Beatrice. There was a sound of a blowing wind as Beatrice slightly raised her eyebrows, wondering what those words might mean.

The sound of the wind—no, that was not wind. It was death approaching, heralding a slaughter.

“Beatri—”

When he noticed, Subaru tried to raise his voice to convey that as soon as he possibly could.

But it was too late. A figure in black seemed to glide as it thrust down the street in a straight line, slipping above Subaru’s head as he knelt still, seemingly dancing toward Beatrice’s turned back as she said, “I came all the way here to visit you—isn’t it rude to run away?”

There was not even a moment of difference between when she announced her bloodlust and when she lashed out with her black blade. —Subaru thought for certain that her blade would impale the little girl’s chest as if sucked into it, with nothing she could do to stop it.

“

delightful."

"Minya—mana arrows of stagnant time. You should have a good taste of them, I suppose."

As both Elsa's eyes glimmered with fury, Beatrice taunted her as she continued gathering magical energy.

Crystal arrows radiated purple as they hovered and rotated above the little girl's head. They quickly became too many to count, and the missiles seemed to lock on to Elsa as if they had minds of their own.

"Outside the archive of forbidden books, this is the utmost I can muster…and yet, it is sufficient to hunt down the likes of you!"

The big guns had come out. A moment later, Beatrice launched the purple arrows in a single volley. With no need for a bow, the arrows of magical energy shot through the wind, bearing down upon the butcher, who had lowered her body in the manner of a spider.

"Certainly, it was a surprise seeing this the first time, but now that I have seen it once—"

Elsa intercepted the countless arrows bearing down upon her with swings of her black blade, filling the air with wildly dancing sounds of crystals shattering. The fragile arrows fleetingly shimmered as they scattered apart, unable to reach Elsa—

"Was I not clear, I wonder? That you should not take me lightly and that this is enough with which to hunt you."

"—This is an error on my part, it would seem."

Licking her lips, Elsa's cheeks reddened in arousal as she replied.

The right arm she used to grip her bladed weapon shattered at the wrist, and the severed remains fell onto the ground. The damage continued to spread in a wave across her shoulder and leg, engulfing her entire right half, leaving Elsa's body cracking as if it was made of delicate glass.

Dark magic: Minya, arrows of stagnant time—having demonstrated their true worth, victory and defeat had been completely decided.

Beatrice showed no futile compassion, such as asking to hear her final words. She thrust an arm toward Elsa, clenching her open hand.

That was all it took for countless arrows in the sky to converge upon Elsa, impaling the entirety of her body.

Repeated destructive impacts caused a cloud of dust to rise from the street. When the dust settled, what remained was a remorseless and cruel yet somehow overwhelmingly beautiful work of lethal art.

Crystal arrows were thrust through her entire body, half of it shattered like inorganic matter. Such was Elsa's death.

"Aaaah. Oh, Elsa, how truly, truly stupid of you."

With the menace dispatched, Subaru gawked, unable to process what was happening. In Subaru's place, it was Meili who reacted, having observed the same battle.

Taking the death of her comrade in stride, Meili showed no sign of pain or loss, wearing only an exasperated look on her face after seeing the result of the battle. Exactly as she had stated, there was no emotion upon it save disappointment toward Elsa.

It was twisted. It was strange. This was a place filled with death. To show such contempt for it—

"Now then, with your companion like this, is it your turn next, I wonder? Even the opponent is a child, Betty shall show no mercy."

"Oh, don't say that… You and I don't look much different at all. We could have been such wonderful friends…"

"A bald-faced lie. Is such a convenient thing even possible with the likes of you, I wonder?"

Though Meili was blatantly taunting her, Beatrice's emotions remained undisturbed as she replied. Above her head, the purple arrows that had so thoroughly pierced Elsa took aim at Meili.

Considering what had befallen her partner, Meili had to have noticed that she was in imminent and extreme peril. How was it that she could remain so calm despite that fact?

She was not afraid of death. She thought nothing of death. Perhaps this was the reason why Meili and Elsa could toy with the lives of others as they had.

"

“That’s… But…what about making her say who…asked her to do this or something…?”

“You mean today’s job? Well, you see, that’d make my client angry, so nope. I won’t say a word.”

At the last minute, Subaru voiced an idealistic argument in an attempt to counter Beatrice’s sound logic. And it was not even Beatrice but Meili who sliced it down as a foolish notion.

Of course she did. Even Subaru himself had no idea what he wanted to do. Perhaps he simply didn’t want to witness the death of a child. Or perhaps—

“Killing a kid, that’s just…”

“—! You, saying such things again—”

With a broken voice, he offered his feeble thoughts of revulsion. His murmur made Beatrice twist her lips and look back. Then she turned a tiny palm toward Subaru, stretching it out toward him when—

“—Eh?”

—a light impact pressed into Subaru’s shoulder, sending him falling onto his side. With that unexpected act leaving him unable to remain kneeling, Subaru’s eyes opened wide with incomprehension as he gazed up at Beatrice, the one who had pushed him.

Her anger toward the stupid exchange from a moment earlier ran stale, and then, somehow, her expression shifted.

Beatrice’s eyebrows fell as she let out a breath of instantaneous relief, forming a thin smile in the process.

—The tip of a black blade was poking out of her chest.

“—My, what an odd feeling in the hand. A spirit’s belly really is different.”

The blade penetrating from behind and peeking out of her chest slowly slid downward, as if to widen the wound. Beatrice’s body gave a heavy shudder. Subaru, dumbfounded, could only watch.

“…With this.”

Haltingly, abruptly, something was woven by Beatrice’s lips.

That instant, Beatrice’s expression and eyes spoke the feelings coming and going through her heart.

“Finally…”

“Wait…!”

He didn’t know what he was trying to say to her. He didn’t know what she was trying to say to him.

And these were things that Subaru and Beatrice would likely never know for all of eternity.

Weakly, Beatrice's body leaned forward and crumpled to the ground. The force of the movement drew out the blade. There was no bleeding from the wound. In its place, light gushed out, as if dislodged from the little girl's flesh. Subaru could tell from her extremities turning into particles that her very existence was melting into the world around them.

"W-wait…"

He didn't know to whom he made that earnest plea. All he could do was beg as he stretched a hand toward the light.

*Please don't take her away. Please don't take this girl away. Don't carry her away.*

The light scattered. He desperately tried to gather it back together. And yet, the motes passed through his hands, vanishing in the blink of an eye. In the span of a single second, Beatrice had become insubstantial.

He couldn't reach her. He couldn't save her. How did this happen? Who could do this to her—?

"—Elsaaaaa!!"

"You don't need to shout. I can hear you just fine."

As he ferociously howled, the side of his face was slammed hard by the tip of the kukri knife.

The hard impact jostling his brain, Subaru rolled violently across the ground. His eyes rolled, his thoughts raced fruitlessly, and his heart could not catch up to the speed of the world spinning around him.

"You took your sweet time. I was getting worried. She was about to kill me, you know…"

"Such a cheeky girl, even after I saved you. As for taking my sweet time, I'm offended at how easily you can say such a thing."

As he lay faceup, a pair of figures leaped into his field of vision against the backdrop of the sky. The spectacle horrified him. Standing right beside Meili, flippantly running her mouth, was none other than Elsa Gramhilde.

The woman who had been blanketed by purple arrows all over, with half her body shattered, was calmly standing right there. There were no visible wounds on her body, but the side effects of the damage had wrecked her clothing, leaving her exposed and half-naked.

There had been a battle. Without doubt, fatal wounds had been inflicted upon her. And yet—

"Don't tell me, you're…you're not gonna say you're immortal or something…?"

"No? That would be incorrect. I merely live a tad filthier than most. A boon granted by a malicious soul. Though I am fresh from being broken to such an extent, I can count the occasions on one hand."

Implication oozed out of that crazed memory as a lustrous, wicked smile came over Elsa. After that, she shifted her eyes to Meili, standing at her side, and said, "One spirit and two maids… Meili, you're finished with everything in the village?"

"Yeah, but my shadow lion lost to the big maid and the black land dragon…"

All three targets had been at the mansion—it was Subaru's thoughtless decision that had made the villagers into victims. Put more bluntly, Subaru had killed them; just as he'd killed Rem, Petra, Frederica—and Beatrice.

*—This was as far as I go this time, huh?*

"What unsightly eyes you have."

*"Ga…gyaaa—?!"*

The instant his mind recognized impending death before him, a scalding sensation shot through his left eye.

Just before the heat burned him, the last thing he saw in the left of his field of vision was a dull black glint—from that, he gathered that the kukri knife in Elsa's hand had gouged out his eyeball. His brain wailed at the terrible sensation of having lost a part of his body, and Subaru reeled from the pain and the bleeding.

His right eye could see his optic nerve getting pulled out like a string. His right eye had witnessed the death of the left. His face had an impossible cavity, a blank space, a meaningless hole in it. His left eye had been lost forever.

"Oh my, Elsa, you're so cruel… What a poor thing."

"One must struggle to live until the very last moment. Otherwise, what meaning is there to life?"

Elsa replied to Meili with a cold voice. Among the short and few occasions he had come into contact with Elsa, this was the first time she had looked upon him with an emotion that could be called…scorn.

"The spirit was the poor thing. To think she sacrificed herself

for the sake of a child like this.”

But ironically, it was none other than Subaru Natsuki who agreed most with Elsa’s words.

Beatrice was an idiot. Why had she done such a thing? She was the one who’d said she wanted to die, wanted someone to kill her. —Why?

“

had committed in that world with death.

He'd already lost too much. That world was already wrecked, far too painful to continue living in. Just like before—no, more so than before, Subaru had committed a sin that made him lose so many things.

If at the cost of his own life, he could get those things back, he would not even hesitate.

This was a world that had to end.

He had to undo Rem's death, Petra's death, Frederica's death, Beatrice's death—all of it.

His regrets at Rem dying in a place he could not even reach, the promise he exchanged with Petra, the words he had vowed to Frederica, his reply to Beatrice's laments—he would carry them into the next world.

If there, he could find an answer, everything else could probably be written off.

"It won't… I won't let it… I'll remember…"

He murmured his self-awareness. He repeated his self-admonishment. He could not escape the fact that Subaru Natsuki—was a criminal.

His powerlessness had caused many deaths. His worthlessness had caused many laments. His recklessness had caused many torments. His inconsiderateness had trampled many a world underfoot. He was an apostle of atrocity.

"

*“Ha.”*

His breath trickled out. He couldn’t really call the broken breaths that trickled out either dry or wet.

He’d been teleported to the same spot again. His connection with the place ran far too deep. As if it was testing him. Testing, experiment—the experimental facility was laughing at him.

—Was this the power of the stone? Or was it the final flicker of Beatrice’s life?

He didn’t know. There were far too many things he didn’t know. He couldn’t leave things like that.

Regrets, regrets were limitless. He could not allow those regrets to shackle his legs, to pin him in place.

“Right now…”

He sank his sense of loss, his sense of despair, down to the lowest depths of his psyche, as his legs slowly stepped forward.

He’d go back with the knowledge of what happened to the Sanctuary when Subaru was absent. If he could at least do that much—

“

# CHAPTER 4

## THE TASTE OF DEATH

**1**

From the cold air pricking his skin, he had been fairly certain.

Even so, seeing that sight with his very own eye sent an unfathomable blow running through Subaru's heart.

That was how much Subaru's lukewarm assumptions were exceeded by the Sanctuary's extreme cold.

"This isn't funny… It's still the second day…"

Grasping his own shoulders and exhaling white breath due to the cold, Subaru clenched his teeth. Without matching up his teeth, he put strength into his jaw, ignored the throbbing of his left eye, and earnestly forced his freezing right eye open.

The wind felt cold enough to slice into his body, and the powdery snow was slamming against him rather than merely falling and piling up. Both intensely robbed him of body heat, a white nightmare that killed off your vitality second by second.

—Snow was falling on the Sanctuary. Subaru knew this landscape.

"But why is it…as soon as this?"

Subaru had seen this powdery landscape before. During the go-around before last, Garfiel was on the verge of killing him when the power of the crystal teleported Subaru to that experimental facility. When he exited the facility, the world was already dyed white. —But at that time, the snow had already fallen.

That was why Subaru had not seen the snow itself as of such great importance, but—

"So the snow fell this hard…"

He ought to have guessed. In the span of a few hours, a half day

at longest, the Sanctuary had been completely blanketed in snow. The tremendous snowfall in such a short time should have made its force easy to imagine.

In the present, just like back then, the cold was extreme enough that Subaru's flesh seemed ready to freeze over.

"Any way…the settlement is this way…"

Shaking off the snow accumulating on his body, Subaru trained his mind toward the settlement, seeking to grasp the situation.

—The throbbing of his left eye made him think of the various tragedies that had occurred just before. *Don't forget, don't forget*, it said to him.

For that moment alone, he would put it on the back burner. He'd definitely have time to think about it later. For the moment, he focused on what was before him. If Subaru did not do so, his feet would stop moving. That was a certainty.

"If you're getting this, answer me, please…"

Wiping the flickering figures from the back of his mind, Subaru felt something hard in his pocket—and drew out the crystal. Grasping this, he focused his thoughts. If Subaru was still qualified, surely she would come.

That eye, watching the Sanctuary, would respond to the desire of the Apostle of Greed—

"—Ah."

Enveloped by wind, he did not hear any sound. But slowly, a figure appeared.

Walking barefoot over the accumulated snow, Ryuzu—or rather, a replica thereof—finally came. As one of the individuals assigned near the lab site, it might well have been Piko.

"I should've made some way to tell you apart from the rest…"

Perhaps at the time he'd been too stunned to wrap his mind around such a thing. Or perhaps the fact that he'd noticed it only then, when so hard-pressed, indicated weakness and aversion from reality—that was impermissible.

"Piko, I think it's you anyway… I have a request. Guide me to the settlement. I don't have time for getting lost."

"

The authority that he had unwittingly obtained was still valid, but using the rights the Witch had arbitrarily granted in accordance with her expectations put him in a vexing mood. Of course, he was enormously grateful, but—

"Just how much of this did you see coming, Echidna…?"

She'd planted a Witch countermeasure into Petra's handkerchief, and Subaru had received from her the means to make Piko cooperate with him that very moment. He didn't understand her true intent. He did not doubt that she was cooperating with him, but still…

There was too much he did not understand. If it was possible, he wanted an answer to that nonsensical circumstance that very moment. The mystery of the Sanctuary, Beatrice's lament—surely, Echidna had the answers to those things and everything else—

"Shit. Right now… I'll deal with her later. This is just…!"

The tremendous snowfall smothering the Sanctuary, that world of extreme cold that seemed ready to freeze his body solid, dyed life and everything else in white.

Subaru had seen that spectacle before. He had lost his life to it, as well.

If this was like back then, if anything and everything about it was the same, then—

"—What the heck happened to you, Emilia?"

—Having apparently made it snow like this, what was she really thinking?

## 2

It took Subaru's legs over an hour before he arrived at the settlement.

With the white world already throwing his sense of distance terribly awry, Subaru's having freshly lost one eye made the trek a terrible ordeal. Snow robbed him of body temperature, his thinking ability had decreased and become leaden, and his legs felt as slow as a turtle's crawl.

"Even so…"

Pulling his shoes out of the snow burying him up to the ankles, Subaru murmured with numb, quivering lips.

Ahead of him, on the other side of blowing snow, he could vaguely make out a simplified stonework building. He had

somehow managed to make it back to the settlement where the residents of the Sanctuary dwelled.

But what tugged at him was—there was no sign of people in the settlement whatsoever.

"There's no lights on in the houses… Isn't anyone inside…?"

So far as he could survey, there was no light from crystal lamps or candles to be seen. That said, amid this cold, not lighting a fire was nigh suicidal behavior. Surely, as signs of life went, the existence of fire was an absolute.

Instantly, the silence made Subaru's intestines clench. What floated into his mind was that this was indeed the Sanctuary enveloped by snow—and from there, a terrible white monster would emerge.

Had the Sanctuary already been defiled by the attack of the Great Rabbit—

"—Hey, you're back, ain't ya? Dunno what stupid face ya brought back with ya, though."

The voice leaping into his eardrums made Subaru reflexively turn around. At the end of his gaze was a figure rudely trampling through the snow—Garfiel walked casually, batting the tremendous snowfall aside. He came to a standstill at a distance of several yards right in front of Subaru, grimacing with apparent dismay.

"Ah? Seriously, the hell's with that face? Ya dropped your left eye somewhere or somethin'?"

"A lot happened after I left… It isn't like you to be so thoughtful, coming out of your way to welcome me back."

"Ha! This ain't sympathy. Besides, seems ya noticed the power that's in the crystal, too."

From the sight of Piko standing at his side, he'd apparently guessed that Subaru had gained command rights. The combativeness enshrouding Garfiel rose a notch higher, and the enmity stabbing into him made the pain of his left eye ooze all the greater.

But behind that strengthened pain, Subaru's heart did not fear Garfiel's combativeness.

It was not that the cold distracting him from the pain or some such thing—rather, the issue was the nature of Garfiel's enmity.

"…Setting aside the being thoughtful part, it's still true this isn't like you. I don't think the you that I know would just stand here casually talking with me at a time like this."

“Now you’re creepin’ me out. I ain’t got time for your nonsense. If you’re seein’ this snow, shouldn’t need no explanation why I can’t have a chitchat with ya over tea, damn it.”

“Meaning, you have something to talk to me about that isn’t chat over tea.”

“

tomb since last night, see?"

"—. Huh? Holed up in the tomb…?"

"Guess ya don't realize that you're the damn cause. Your disappearin' like that hit the Princess's heart pretty darn hard. It threw her way off, and then she went into the tomb…and she ain't come out since."

"That's crazy! I mean, I left a proper letter and everyth…"

"Letter…?"

*What letter?* was the reply's subtext, one that made Subaru draw in his breath.

He'd certainly slid a letter under the Ryuzu residence door. Subaru had properly written and left behind a letter saying he was leaving the Sanctuary. If Emilia had read it, she shouldn't have been shocked to the point of making her fall into distress. Even without that letter, there was no reason for her to hide herself from others—

"…Seems like a scheme's at work that ain't from you or me."

"Eh?"

"Leave that for later. Follow me. Izolte's decision put history back on course an' all. Annoys me to heck, but you're the only one I can use. —We're headin' to the tomb."

Motioning with his chin, Garfiel indicated for him to come along as he walked out. The great difference in power of their legs meant his kicked the snow aside, never stopping for anything. Subaru somehow caught up to him with a small run.

"The tomb, meaning…you're gonna let me meet Emilia?!"

"Ain't you an optimistic bastard. I ain't letting ya meet her. I'm getting ya to get your Princess to stop this snow from fallin'. You're goin' inside. That's your damned job, not mine."

"…! Yeah, that's fine with me. If you're not gonna butt into me talking with Emilia, then…"

It was a brusque request, but Subaru had no objection, accepting it with grace.

Neither Subaru nor Garfiel had lost their enmity for each other. But just like when they confronted the Witch, this momentary request put them on the same page—and so they walked together for the moment.

"—Garfiel, how much did you hear from Ryuzu?"

Abruptly, as he squinted at the snow, Subaru posed that question to the back walking in front of him. The words did not make Garfiel look back. "Ha?" he snarled sourly as he said, "…I see.

Ya forced the old hag to talk about the crystal's power against her will, did ya?"

"People would get the wrong idea hearing that, but most of that chat was voluntary… Well, since the person concerned said there was compulsory power, suppose there's reason to doubt how much was really voluntary, but…"

"Ha, I wonder. Me, I didn't hear nothin' from the old hag. Just you came back with one of the 'Eyes' with ya. Hearin' that was enough to send me comin' out to see it."

"Eyes… I see, so stuff's conveyed from Piko to Ryuzu, then."

The tongue click mixed with an explanation made Subaru nod in acknowledgment. Glancing backward and at an angle, he saw Piko following, saying nothing in particular. The sight irritated Garfiel.

"I dunno about this Piko business, but don't you go stickin' names on 'em. They're dolls without minds of their own. Ain't no point feelin' sorry for 'em."

"…Like hell I can, especially when they look just like Ryuzu."

"That's exactly why. We've got an old hag. We don't need any more. Those are fakes."

The wording and tone of voice behind the coarse conclusion ascribed great meaning to it. Though the statement seemed harsh, to Subaru, it sounded almost like Garfiel was insisting on that to himself.

"—We're here. Fair bit o' snow piled up even here at the entrance, too."

As Garfiel came to a halt, Subaru peered past his shoulder at the silhouette of the large building obstructed by a blanket of billowing snow—confirming the presence of the tomb. His breath caught just a little.

"Emilia's inside. Knowing that, you didn't just rush in there yourself?"

"Me, I… The residents o' the Sanctuary can't go in. That's the rule. And me, I'm a resident here."

"I heard from Ryuzu that they can't lift the barrier, but wasn't going in and out separate? Given the circumstances, you could've… *Guu?!*"

"Hey, stop with the long, whinin' preamble, you bastard."

Subaru was saying that Garfiel could have trampled on that rule and gone inside himself.

Garfiel interrupted Subaru's words by grabbing him by the collar, slightly lifting his body off the ground, and drawing his now-clawed hand close to Subaru's face while showing off his fangs.

"Me, I protect this place. What's your role? It's to protect the Princess. Galganchua second-guesses a comeback not. Or should I gouge out your right eye, too?"

Showering Subaru in ferocious combativeness, Garfiel made his gripping hand relent. Subaru lightly coughed as he glared at Garfiel. But all Garfiel did was nod with his chin.

"Go."

No ifs or buts about it. Having come this far, that was the only word Garfiel had to offer.

Turning his back, Subaru trod on snow without a single footprint upon it, heading for the entrance of the tomb buried in white.

The only two seeing him off, watching Subaru's back, were Garfiel and Piko, standing side by side.

—One was emotionless. The other had an indecipherable emotion welling up in the deepest depths of his anger.

## 3

The cold, serene sensation of the air was unrelated to the extreme cold outside, almost as if time had stopped.

Amid the gloom, the sound of Subaru's shoes echoed as he advanced down the corridor, asking his heart but one thing.

—That moment, was he sane or had some mental disturbance befallen him?

Already, several tragedies that could not be undone had befallen that world.

He had lost Rem, Petra, and Frederica, and he had seen Beatrice die. Returning to find the Sanctuary in this state, his striving to maintain calm could only strike him as absurd.

A man aware of that absurdity could not fail to be disturbed. There was no way he was sane.

Even so, he could not allow himself to stop thinking. He smacked away all thoughts of surrender. He had to crave a future ahead of him, above him. For that, he'd pay whatever it took, including paying with his life.

If not for that, then why was Subaru still—?

*“—Subaru?”*

The voice he heard from the gloom freed Subaru from what felt like a long time trapped in a cage of thought. Straight ahead, the corridor came to an end, and he could see the stonework room that gave off a faint blue glow. There stood a single figure.

Her silver hair glimmered in the faint light. Her purple eyes seemed to pull you in. Subaru did not think of those characteristics as a murmur trickled out of him.

“—Emilia.”

“Yes. That’s right, Subaru… It’s me. It’s me, Emilia.”

The four brief syllables became a name, and the fact that there was a reply crashed through Subaru like a bolt of lightning.

His knees wavered and crumpled. Perhaps others would think this grandiose. However, he could endure no more.

Fatigue, loss, despair, relief—countless sensations stuffed Subaru’s limbs with lead. Subaru had glossed over these things through willpower, but when his ears heard that voice like a silver bell, he reached his limit.

With those taut strings cut, he tumbled forward. As he tumbled, arms instantly reached out to support him.

He felt something soft and warm. The warmth of the touch from right before his eyes made Subaru’s body go rigid.

—That moment, he was being gently embraced by Emilia.

“Ah, er, sor… My body just let go…”

“

that…”

Subaru spoke awkwardly when the fact that he’d left the Sanctuary was pointed out to him. He tried to excuse it as something that should never have happened like that, if only the letter had reached her. Yes, the letter.

“The letter…that’s right. I wrote a letter. I wrote everything on it, that’s why. I really meant to tell you about everything, but…”

“Tee-hee.”

As he groped for where the precaution he’d left ought to have led, he gaped.

In the middle of their conversation in that tension-filled situation, Emilia made an adorable laugh. She laughed.

It was as if everything was normal, as if Subaru’s tongue had spun another joke during the days when nothing was happening at the mansion. —As if she had forgotten her sense of duty in regards to the Trial.

“Even without working that hard to make an excuse, I won’t get upset. Oh, Subaru, you don’t need to be so pale. You really are just careless.”

“E…milia…?”

“It’s fine. It’s all right, no excuses needed. I mean, you came back, Subaru. I always believed you would. I said, Subaru will come for me. If I work hard and properly fulfill my own duty, he’ll come and save me… That’s always, *always* how it’s been. Right?”

As she sweetly spoke the words, Emilia drew near to Subaru’s chest.

She had an adorable, bewitching smile, and her sweet murmurs were simply enchanting. Subaru gazed at the heat rising from her lustrous breaths and the moisture in her eyes; that witchiness was wrapping around his heart.

Then, bathed in so much passion that it made his throat feel parched, Subaru’s instincts cried out.

Wrong. Something was wrong. The ill feeling he’d had from the start of their reunion had never been revised.

Something was wrong. Something, somewhere, felt off, even though Emilia was that adorable.

Even though Emilia was that adorable as she responded to Subaru…

“C-come to think of it… I heard that you’ve been here since yesterday…”

With that ill feeling still lodged in his throat, Subaru changed the topic with the worst possible performance ability, even by his standards. At that rate, he'd drown in her sweet voice. Straw or no, he needed to grab onto something before he was fully submerged.

"You being here means you were in the Trial, right? But right now you're…"

As he spoke the words, Subaru put his finger on one of the tips of that ill feeling.

This was the tomb, and the room for the Trial at that. The Trial definitely began as soon as Emilia arrived there. Invited to the Trial of her past, her mind would not escape until the very end.

And yet, Emilia was there awake, meaning that her Trial had ended in—

"…Emilia?"

In the middle of his question, Subaru stiffened from an unexpected sensation. It was the sensation of fingers being inserted into his black hair, gently stroking his head.

Emilia was stroking Subaru's head. Her cheeks were red as she grinned.

"Oh, Subaru, you stroke my hair once in a while, don't you? So I should return the favor."

"

That was why—

"Stay with me forever? As long as you're with me, I don't need anything else—"

—In his wildest dreams, he'd never imagined how frightening the eyes of an Emilia blind with love could be.

"At first, I was *really* scared, you see. It was *really* hard. I mean, I wasn't able to do anything right at all, and I thought, Subaru's going to get fed up with me like this."

"But I thought right after, this is no good. I can't just be soft, shake in fear and let someone else take care of everything… This was *really* stupid of me, too, huh? I mean, I finally realized that you've always been taking care of everything, Subaru."

"I remembered your words, Subaru. They've come up over and over till now. You've been telling me them ever since the first time we met. You've been giving me courage, urging me onward, supporting me… I remember, that you've said you love me…"

"I finally realized that you've always come through for me in *really* big ways. But in spite of that, you not being here made me worried; I felt like it would crush me…"

"That's why when I saw Subaru coming to me now, I felt my chest squeezing… It got hot, too hot to endure, I thought; this might be a dream, but no, it's not… I'm sorry, I don't even know what I want to say anymore. Er, erm… I want to say this properly, so…"

"I'm sorry for everything up to now, Subaru. I, did a horrible thing to you. It has to be really something to have someone always thinking of you like this… I'm so self-serving. Even though I thought I want to understand Subaru more, I don't understand you at all."

"But it's different now. I've been thinking about you all this

time, Subaru. I've been feeling all these things. Now I want to say all the things to you that you've been saying to me… Mmm, I'm so sorry. This is *really* unfair of me. I—I need to properly say these things."

"I need to properly…mm, properly convey them."

"Hey, Subaru. I love you. I really love you. When I think about you, when I think only of you, I want to be with you forever. That's what I think."

"I'd be happy if…you think about me the same way, Subaru…"

"Eh-heh-heh. Yeah, yeah… I love you. Subaru…I really love you."

**4**

"—What, the hell do ya think you're thinkin', aaah?"

When Subaru stood at the entrance of the tomb, he was greeted by Garfiel's voice, brimming with rage.

The menace of the snow had not abated. The strength of the wind blowing it had increased, mercilessly piling up the snow that progressively blotted out the Sanctuary's original landscape. As a resident, it was natural for him to harbor anger at the spectacle. And it was unreasonable for him to not harbor anger toward Subaru as well.

—For having left the girl, presumably the cause of that snow inside, Subaru had come out alone.

"Alone, alone…alone?! What about the Princess…the half-demon?! What about the damned snow?!"

"Emilia ain't comin' out. She's sleeping inside right now."

"Sleeping ya say? This ain't time for slackin' off like…"

"She's exhausted. Since last night, she's been repeating the Trial over and over. Her body and mind are… Her mind in particular is worn down. Right now, I want to just let her rest."

Stubbornly believing it to be the best way to break the situation open, Emilia had challenged the Trial a number of times. Unable to surpass it even so, it wasn't hard for him to imagine her mental

state as the number of those challenges piled up.

After all, Subaru had felt the same sense of powerlessness as many times as he had tasted death.

—Inside the stone room, with Subaru's jacket over her, Emilia was peacefully asleep.

His memories of her whispers of blindly devoted love and the heat of her body's clingy embrace were still fresh. These filled him with enough feelings of love to make the blood plasma in Subaru's body boil and enough regret to make him want to die.

The memory of the redness of Emilia's cheeks, the quivering of her lips, and her whispers of love to Subaru came back over and over.

No one could understand how Subaru had agonized over the prospect of falling into that softness, drowning in it, and sinking down with Emilia together.

There was no reason for anyone to blame him. This was a world that was already done for. It was a platform of bubbles set to disappear. Just who could blame Subaru for choosing comfort and pulling the curtain down over them?

"So ya left the half-demon, and the snow ain't endin'. Ya come back empty-handed with your head down, and what, ya think I'm just gonna accept that, huh? Hey, hey, just who do ya think ya are, huh?"

Still angry, Garfiel clacked his fangs, storming his way up to the tomb. With Subaru standing right before him at the entrance, the pupils of his jade eyes spoke of danger as they narrowed.

"So what kind of excuse did ya bring to tell me, aaah?"

"—Emilia. She said that she loves me."

"

they elongated, and his body, on the verge of transfiguration, swelled to twice its size.

Though his eye caught that harbinger of transfiguration, Subaru's expression did not waver.

All he did was stare at the angry Garfiel with his right eye alone as he continued to speak.

"Emilia said she loves me. She said to me if I was there with her, it was enough."

"Why you…"

"She said with a cute face, a sweet voice, right by my side… Enough, it was enchanting."

"I'm sayin', what of it?! One glance was all it took to tell the half-demon had a thing for ya! The hell does it matter now! Ya want me to crush your head in my fa—"

"—There's no way Emilia would tell me she loves me, goddamnit!!"

"—?!!"

As Garfiel howled, Subaru thrust his face into Garfiel's and shouted.

The explosion of emotion made even the angry Garfiel forget himself and shut his mouth. Glaring at the reeling Garfiel, Subaru's face fell apart as he screamed.

He cast the words exchanged in the tomb, the heat from their touching, the affirmed feelings of love to the wind.

He felt their loss. There was no way he could not. He couldn't help but regret the loss of the words, the heat, and the emotions of love he had received. But Subaru could not become deft enough to pretend to be deceived by a false gemstone.

—If he was deft enough to play the fool and call it quits, his chest would not be filled with such pain.

"Like hell she'd say that to me. Emilia telling me she loves me… relying on me, leaving everything to me, say if I'm there she doesn't need anything else… No way in hell."

"Th-the heck are ya tryin' to say…"

"Telling me 'everything' like that… There's no way. And if Puck was by her side, there's no way she'd rely on me in a way like that…!"

He did not know just how much he desired to be Emilia's number one. But he was not so self-conceited as to believe he was Emilia's number one that very moment. Her number one, the place

in which she laid her greatest trust, was the little cat spirit, even then her one and only family.

With that same Puck absent, Subaru had stepped up to serve as his stand-in, nothing more.

That confession of love, those hot fingertips, and her trembling breaths—he didn't want to think that they were all false.

—But they were not genuine. If they weren't genuine, he couldn't accept them.

"Someone's driven that girl…driven her into a corner until she ended up like that. Drove that girl's heart into a corner enough to make a situation like this, where she has to depend on someone like *me*…"

"Y-you're the one who decided to do that, damn it…! So what, she made it snow like this for payback for all her failures?! She's sayin' it's me and the old hags' 'n' geezers' fault?!"

As if chewing down on Subaru's words, Garfiel brushed the snow aside and grabbed Subaru by the collar. He shoved him against the wall behind him by brute force, and an anguished groan trickled out of Subaru's throat.

"Like I know or care what made her lash out! Bring the half-demon out! If ya can't even do that…"

"Bring Emilia out and make it stop snowing…? No can do. I mean…"

"Ya mean what?!"

"—I mean, it won't help because Emilia's not the one making this snow fall."

Subaru's confident declaration made Garfiel's grip on his collar relent.

With Garfiel gazing straight at him with a dumbfounded look, Subaru continued.

"The situation's all wrong. The snow and Emilia… If she was holed up in the tomb, the timeline for making the snow fall is all messed up. If Emilia did make the snow fall, what's her reason?"

"Th-that's…payback against me, the old hags, and geezers…"

"Why would Emilia want payback against you? That's just weird. You hold animosity for Emilia right now because the snow's falling. The snow, being backed into a corner… The timing doesn't match up."

The situation had been warped from the beginning. He could only think that someone had set it up that way.

Someone in the Sanctuary was controlling the situation, hiding Subaru's letter, inducing Emilia to hole herself up in the tomb, and stirring up Garfiel's anger against her.

And as for who that someone was—he had a single guess.

"When it comes to people who can make it…who can control the weather, I have two suspects only. But Emilia can't do it. Without Puck here, she can't do something on that scale."

"You're sure of that…?"

"…A deduction with my own optimism mixed in, I suppose. I want to believe it, that's all. Even if she's desperate, Emilia's not the kind of girl who can do something like this. That's just what I want to believe."

"Just want to believe…"

Subaru's repeated pleas made Garfiel close his eyes and sink into thought. But his internal conclusion was soon in coming. Garfiel removed the hand gripping the collar, freeing Subaru from his grasp.

When Subaru's feet touched the ground, he lightly stroked his throat and nodded toward Garfiel.

"—Where's Roswaal?"

"The bastard's in the old hag's house. Ram was supposed to go there and get 'im, but…can't expect much from her at a time like this."

When one searched for suspects fulfilling the same conditions, only one name fit the bill of a mastermind. Garfiel had easily accepted the notion, perhaps because doubts about Roswaal had been growing inside of him as well.

"Ram's…"

"Shaddap. Even against the girl I've fallen for, what I gotta do don't change."

If Roswaal was the mastermind, the loyalties of Ram, his faithful retainer, came into question as well. With a low growl, Garfiel's statement interrupted Subaru voicing his concerns about that.

Subaru envied that resolve. Unyielding before the possibility the girl he'd fallen for might prove his enemy, he had the heart of steel Subaru wished he had.

Besides, setting Roswaal aside, it still wasn't clear where Ram stood in Subaru's book.

Going by his relationship with Ram to that point and her

actions during those repeated worlds in the Sanctuary, he had a deduction that bordered on hope, but—

"—Hearing the answer is the last thing on my to-do list in this world."

Subaru murmured that quietly, so that the spirited Garfiel might not hear it.

## 5

"My, my, it is quite rare to see such faces put together with such interesting tiiiiming, is it not?"

Roswaal smiled amusedly at the unexpected arrival of his guests.

His heavily wounded body wrapped in bandages, Roswaal was lying sideways on his bed in the room allotted to him, his face bearing the makeup of a clown as per usual—and before this man they had eyed as the mastermind stood Subaru and Garfiel side by side.

The expressions on both their faces were fairly severe, and anyone inside the room could tell that a palpable sense of tension was filling up the room. In spite of this, Roswaal was calm; if anything, he was in a rather good mood as he spread both hands apart.

"So a pair of youths have come to cart off a heavily wounded man during such a tremendous snowfall… Although I must somewhat question your choice of personnel. Judging from that left eye, you are quite a gravely wooooounded man as well?"

"Cut the taunts, Roswaal. This guy and I both know darn well that's the kind of guy you are…but under certain circumstances, whether that's allowable changes. Like now."

"Seeing the two of you standing side by side, such words become truly persuaaasive…"

Saying this, Roswaal shifted taunting eyes toward Garfiel, standing right beside Subaru. He, standing in front of the room's entrance to seal it off, crinkled his nose sourly.

"Like he just said. Changes with the circumstances. Me, if I don't find out for sure who's my enemy and who ain't, I won't know who to grind into mincemeat."

"What a barbaric thing to say… In the end, Garf is Garf, I suppose?"

As Garfiel made a low growl, Ram, standing in a corner of the room, sighed toward him. Just as they'd figured at the tomb, she was indeed waiting at Roswaal's side, even amid that snowfall.

And from the very fact she was there, Ram was a partner in Roswaal's schemes—perhaps not all of them, but there could be no doubt she shared in part of them. The problem lay in the true intent behind those schemes.

Just what was Roswaal's objective, and why was Ram cooperating with him?

"Don't butt in, Ram, not this time. Me, I don't wanna turn my claws against ya."

"Should there be rudeness toward Master Roswaal, Ram *will* stand before him. It all depends upon you, Garf."

"Calm yourselves, both of you. That of course goes for Garfiel, but you too, Ram. For the moment, do as he says and be silent. — Those are words that should be saved for the proper moment."

"He has spoken. Be grateful for Master Roswaal's benevolence."

With a haughty, audible snort, Ram took a step back, suspending her role as attending servant. Garfiel went "Keh," clicking his tongue as he said, "Puttin' Ram aside, me, I've got no reason to listen to your words and calm down or anythin' like it. Watch how ya talk to me. Dependin' on what ya say, my claws might end up turned against one of ya."

"Can you stop including me as a potential target for violence like it's supernatural? Geez, you're still doubting me?"

"Ya've got your own mountain of suspicious things to spare, damn it. Witch-smellin' lunatic."

They harbored suspicions toward the same person but whether they shared comradery was a different issue altogether. Subaru didn't trust Garfiel on all fronts, either. They both had claws pointing at each other.

Then, upon the exchange between the pair, Roswaal closed one eye, the world reflecting in his yellow pupil as he said, "Setting a bedridden man like me aside, you should not look upon good Subaru too lightly, Garfiel. If the two of you clash, it is by no means guaranteeeed that the odds of victory are invariably in your favor."

"He's missin' one eye. How could he win? Ya got holes in your eyes? If he heard all the fights I've won, he'd be smacked senseless."

"Is that so? If the proper conditions were aligned, I do not think his chances of victory are quite so poooor…"

As Roswaal narrowed his eye, Subaru could only agree that he must have a hole in it. Since being summoned to that other world, Subaru's individual combat exploits were limited to one victory by three surprise blows.

Of course, it was futile even trying to compare Garfiel to three punks in a back alley.

"—!! Enough of this! I didn't come 'cause I wanted to talk about crap like that! Are ya both asleep?! The old hags are out there, shiverin' and waitin'!"

To cut off that futile line of conversation, Garfiel stomped the heel of his shoe onto the wooden floor. As the impact sent wood dust spreading within the room, Subaru closed his eye to the angrily snarling Garfiel.

Garfiel was right to be angry. Subaru had left Emilia at the tomb. Surely everyone present knew there was no time for taking it easy.

Accordingly, Subaru took a deep breath, opening his right eye. Catching Roswaal in his field of vision, he—

"You're the one who made the snow fall here in the Sanctuary, aren't you, Roswaal?"

—cut straight to the heart of the matter.

"

Excuses, being shaken, attempts to gloss things over, violence—but this result was different from everything he'd surmised.

Naturally, faced with a question he did not understand, he could not even imagine what answer was being sought.

"Mm-mmm… I see. I see. I seeee…… How disappointing."

Facing the suspicion swirling in Subaru's black eyes, Roswaal nodded, his face giving an answer that went far beyond words. From his sunken face and voice, it was immediately clear that this was not the answer he yearned for.

The sight threw Subaru off. It felt to him like the man known as Roswaal—despite being heavily wounded, face pale—had literally fallen from his standpoint and clear through the realm of normal men. But—

"—Ya ain't gonna deny it, are ya?"

The angered Garfiel paid no heed to the change in Roswaal. To him, the important thing was not Roswaal's sentiments but the identity of the culprit behind the menace assailing the Sanctuary.

Faced with that blame, Roswaal seemed numb to it, letting a heavy sigh trickle out.

"I could assert my innocence, but you are hardly one to politely accept that at this juncture, yes? You came here because you possess more than adequate reasons for doing so. Should I not pay this the proper respeeeect?"

"Respect! Respect, huh?! Ha, well ain't I grateful. Milkiss had no line of retreat! Maybe it's high time I paid that excess of stupidity proper respect, yaaah?!"

To Roswaal, who acknowledged the suspicions against him, Garfiel unleashed a sharp exhale and stepped forward. In the cramped confines of the room, it was only a few paces from the entrance to the bed. He easily closed the distance in a single second. Riding that momentum, Garfiel moved to grip the self-possessed Roswaal's throat.

Was restraint really going to hold back strength whipped up by anger? Fearful of this, Subaru tried to raise his voice. But faster than Subaru could speak, a figure circled in front of Garfiel and spoke up.

"—I told you, Garf. I shall permit no rudeness toward Master Roswaal."

Now directly in front of the outstretched arm, Ram pushed out her modest chest, blocking its path with her body. For an instant,

the prospect of hurting someone he cared for made anger and hesitation rise up in his eyes and then some form of determination.

Guessing that this determination was, in truth, the will to remove even Ram from his path, the color of Subaru's face changed. In fact, in a previous loop, he had seen Garfiel take Ram's life once already—

"Ram. You are truly a fine servant."

—Accordingly, Subaru's reaction to that sentence was thoroughly late in coming.

Wary of Garfiel's violent actions and concerned for Ram's safety, Subaru knitted his brows, perplexed. There was nothing odd per se about the sentence just now. Just as he stated, Roswaal was praising Ram for her attempt to defend her master.

That wasn't the problem. Roswaal, lying on his side on the bed last anyone checked, was not trying to get up. He was not glaring at Ram and Garfiel, either.

But Subaru felt like something strange had entered his eyes. Not finding a reason for why he was getting a bad feeling, Subaru's bewilderment deepened his irritation as he desperately groped for some kind of answer.

And finally, that ill feeling took tangible form.

"

When frailly, Ram attempted to call out his name, Roswaal interrupted her, speaking those words in an exceedingly gentle voice.

From behind, he preciously embraced Ram's thin body, softly stroking her pink hair with his left hand. Ram seemed entranced by his touch, her cheeks reddened as a charming smile came to rest upon her face.

—From the corner of the lips forming that charming smile came out a delayed spill of fresh blood.

Of course it did. Her chest had been run straight through from the back.

“

they began to lengthen, and his body, which Subaru had guessed was on death's door, was instinctively urging him to transfigure in order to avert that death.

If he transformed into a giant tiger, it might well save his own life. However, if that happened, his healing would be interrupted. Ram would die. His rational mind rejected that, clashing ferociously with his survival instincts.

If he stopped healing their wounds before he transfigured, there still existed some chance both of them might survi—

"—It would be troublesome to let you transfigure, yes?"

Roswaal took a single step forward. His right leg bent and then lashed out.

With a vividness that made it impossible for Subaru to tear his eyes away, wind entwined around his bent leg as it scored a direct hit to the back of Garfiel's skull—causing a heavy sound, much like that of an egg cracking, rupturing his target and smearing that blond hair with such ease it didn't seem real.

"—ll."

With his skull half-smashed, Garfiel lay on his side, glaring at Roswaal with his one remaining eye. In a twist of fate, he and Ram fell together almost as one, both lying powerlessly on the floor.

Garfiel was dying, and in his arms, Ram did not move a muscle, either, a thin smile still on her lips.

No healing magic existed that could be effective on people with dead faces like this. None would even activate. By the time Roswaal drew his arm out, Ram's life had already been lost, for her heart had been destroyed.

Not realizing this, Garfiel struggled to save her, but that was as far as it went.

"Even I would find it extremely difficult to weave magic without Garfiel noticing. Accordingly, for but a brief moment, I relied upon means that are heretical for a magic user."

Wiping his bloodstained hand and foot with the sheets, the Roswaal that had murdered the pair turned toward Subaru.

During that entire time, Subaru had stood rooted to the spot, unable to move a step, unable to speak a word.

Inspecting Subaru, Roswaal narrowed his eyes before shrugging his shoulders with a casual air as he spoke again.

"Now then—in accordance with the vow we have exchanged, let us speak, Subaru Natsuki."

## 6

Subaru stood in a daze amid that incomprehensible scene.

Ram had sunken into a pool of blood; Garfiel had lost his life from his skull being crushed. As the two lay atop each other, Roswaal—he who had murdered both—stood astride their corpses, calmly gazing Subaru's way.

The incredible physical feat he had witnessed left Subaru unable to even speak. Realizing that Subaru was gawking, Roswaal stared at Subaru with his yellow eye alone as he said, "To believe a magic user cannot engage in unarmed combat is to fall prey to prejudice, you seeee. It is the sort of pitfall even Witches are known to miss. You should remember for future reference."

Perhaps he meant it as honest advice, but Roswaal's lecture, made with a raised finger, left Subaru horrified.

Certainly, he was shocked. That Roswaal's unarmed combat technique was eye-catching was the simple truth. Comparing that shock to what he felt at seeing the pair's sudden deaths was difficult.

And yet, he could not comprehend how Roswaal could smile pleasantly, not letting it bother him.

"Wh-why…?"

"Mm? Why what?"

"Why did you kill th……? Why did you kill Ram…eh? Even Garfiel's…"

"Because Garfiel was an impediment to speaking with you. I did a terrible thing to Ram…but her cooperation was indispensable for getting Garfiel out of the way. Had she not created an opening, even my odds of victory would have been quite poor."

"—Huh?"

Shrugging his shoulders like it was no big deal, he came right out and plainly confessed his murderous intentions. The contents flew into Subaru, sailing right over his sentiments of anger, drawing out an unconscious breath.

It was an absurd answer for an absurd situation. It was an absurd comment about an absurd fate. What the hell was going on?

"An unexpected reaction. The Subaru that I know is a boy who would see nothing beyond this situation, fly into a rage, and even try to grab hold of me. —Am I wrong, Subaru Natsuki?"

"What are you trying to say? You're a shitty, psychopathic

bastard… There's no way in hell I can…!"

"Forgive me or the like? You do not require language such as that. You should be more honest in facing your own heart. That is the 'you' I desire, the 'you' that I have always, alwaaaays desired."

"—!! Stop, looking at me with that eye! The hell! The hell is wrong with you?!"

During those words, Roswaal had continued looking at Subaru with his left eye alone. The intent gaze of that lone yellow iris made him feel queasy, like something was clawing at the core of his psyche. Hence, his voice had gone ragged.

"You murdered two people! And that ain't all! I'm not talking about just this! Before, that's right, before when you were talking about the Witch Cult, too! You've been giving me the slip over and over—"

"—Over and over. Yes, over and over, Subaru."

Subaru shuddered, feeling an awful chill, almost like a wet fingertip was stroking his spine.

Subaru had given in to his violent storm of emotions, venting about all the things that had been agonizing him to date. The expression that Roswaal trained upon Subaru was exceedingly out of place.

He was smiling. The sides of his face were cracked by his thin lips, and Roswaal wore that pleasant expression full of welcome, the grin of a demon, as he kept staring at Subaru.

This was not sarcasm or anything of the sort. He felt genuine delight at seeing Subaru's demeanor. All Subaru could feel for that flow of incomprehensible emotion was disgust. He feared it, for it was something he absolutely could not comprehend.

As he peered into Subaru's trembling eyes, Roswaal made what seemed like an affectionate nod.

"Very well. Since you do not understand, I, someone who assumes he understands, have decided to arbitrarily enlighten you; specifically, I'll tell you the reason why you, despite witnessing the deaths of these two and now confronting me, the one who slew them both, are not acting out of emotion."

"

assumed they understood.

*What do you understand! As if I'm not sad that they're dead! I'll kill you!!*

Inside Subaru's heart, one phrase after another floated up, all candidates for what he should shout in response. They were countless.

In truth, Subaru had multiple violent emotions swirling around inside of him. They cried for him to chew out the clown with the all-knowing face.

Anger, despair, grief, shock—his emotions were ready to make him explode and say those things at any moment—

"—It is because you do believe these things can be undone, is it nooooot?"

"—?!!"

The blow made his blood freeze. Subaru went rigid, feeling like his heart had been clenched.

It was not a metaphor. He truly felt like his heart was in a death grip. The impact was simply that great.

Whatever Roswaal meant by it, his statement's wording was all too close to Return by Death. The Witch's court was strict and severe. That very moment, the world might stop and those black arms emerge to impose their sentence. Or perhaps the arms would be insufficient, and the Witch might descend once more, drinking the Sanctuary dry—

"…Not…coming?"

"This wariness… I see. So you and *that* have exchanged a pact. In light of that, I can now accept how you came to so many of your words and actions to date. She is quite a mean one."

"Accept, you say…? No, before even that, you…!"

Subaru's face went pale as Roswaal put a hand to his chin and nodded. There was no mistake: Roswaal's statement that moment had most certainly touched upon the taboo at Subaru's core—

"You…you noticed what's been happening with me…?!"

"To explain, it is likely faster to show you than to tell you."

"Wait! That feels like you're just giving me the slip aga—"

When Roswaal turned around and headed toward the bed, Subaru tried to close the distance. However, he hesitated to touch the pool of blood at the tips of his toes—and the corpses of Ram and Garfiel within.

During that time, Roswaal arrived at the bed. He reached a

hand under the pillow, groping under it, and—

"…Wait, don't tell me that's—?"

"A Gospel? Rest at ease. This is not any such knockoff but one of the only two genuine articles."

When he lifted what was in his hand, Subaru recalled hearing similar words from Roswaal before. When the topic had come up previously, the man had stated that these were the real deal, that only two volumes existed, and that one was in Beatrice's hands. As for the other—

"So you had it…!"

"It would seem you require no explanation as to the book's contents. It would also seem you do not require an explanation of who possesses the other, either. In that case, you require no further answer to your query, I take it?"

"

known."

"—!! Then…"

"I hope you do not say, *Why did you do nothing about them?* or the like. Do you know what that girl desires someone do to relieve her sadness? You have heard her plea, have you not?"

Skewered by Roswaal's sound logic, Subaru's heart reeled, like it was spitting up blood.

It was the truth. It was very much the truth. Subaru had heard Beatrice's plea. He'd reached out to her, wanting to save her. His hand had been rejected, his voice had failed to reach her and in the end, Beatrice's life had been taken by a vile blade.

The power and the knowledge to heal four centuries of isolation was too much to hope for from Subaru.

Going back in time, using his means of redoing things, Subaru could create a "final" chance to exchange words with Beatrice any number of times. —But how should one heal four centuries of sadness?

He couldn't turn back the clock on the four centuries of time Beatrice had spent in the archive of forbidden books.

"—Though I must envy her."

Almost as an afterthought, the murmuring voice crept its way into Subaru's battered eardrums.

Unable to believe what he just heard, Subaru lifted his face, staring at the mouth Roswaal had used to speak the words. But Roswaal did not notice his gaze, and together with a vague sigh, he carried on.

"Beatrice was able to vanish, granting her long-cherished desire. That is the meaning behind the fact that you are here, am I riiiiight?"

"Long-cherished…desire? A-are you?! Are you trying to tell me dying like, like *that* was her long-cherished desire?!"

"That was the girl's wish. Whatever end each person hopes for is not something others should belittle, and her desires were her own. It is impermissible to sully that girl's demise, for you and for me."

"You killed Ram and Garfiel, and you get to say *that* to me?!"

As Subaru shouted in anger and raised his finger in accusation for the slaughter, Roswaal shook his head side to side. It was as if to say, *And were your own actions so noble that you can act so high and mighty?*

Subaru had heard Beatrice's plea, her lament. And yet, why was Roswaal, the man who had done nothing for her, able to put on that face like he understood Beatrice?

—After all, there was no sympathizing with Beatrice's wish, her plea for death. That wish was not what she had wanted at all.

—If it was, then why had Beatrice shielded Subaru in the end?

"Like I said, I envy her. —After all, it would seem that my long-cherished desire shall not be granted."

"—?"

Until that point, Subaru had been unable to comprehend a single word out of Roswaal's mouth. There was only chaos in his mind.

But even so, what he just said left a particularly strange and queasy feeling in Subaru.

*Granting a long-cherished desire. Fulfilling a wish.* These felt wrong, discordant. As for his wish—

"What…do you want, then? What the heck is your wish? Why —why do all this…?"

"I shall not speak it. I have a vow to uphold, much like you. What has come out of my mouth so far is the greatest concession I am capable of giving you. But allow me to say this."

"

been a lie. This time around, Subaru had learned her book was filled with blank pages.

So what about Roswaal's book, then? Was the future accurately detailed therein?

"Is this snow according to the book, too?! Did the writing in the book tell you to make the snow fall? What the hell for?!"

"That should be obvious. —To isolate Lady Emilia."

"—H…uh?

"I suppose I must repeat myself. Making the snow fall like this inflicts harm upon the residents. This isolates Lady Emilia, causing her to fall into an unstable mental state. Without this snow, she would not, yes?"

Roswaal's conclusion accurately described the state of Emilia, left behind at the tomb, as if he could see it for himself.

The situation had advanced precisely in accordance with Roswaal's prediction. But the issue was not the effects. Subaru did not comprehend the meaning behind the thought process of Roswaal's that had arrived at such an extreme.

With Subaru perplexed, Roswaal spread his hands out a little.

"This is a land connected to a Witch, and Lady Emilia is in the position of confronting the Trial to liberate the Sanctuary. For a great, unseasonable snowfall to arrive out of season in a place she is located…one can imagine what would happen?"

"Wh-why, you…"

"At a time like this, Garfiel's lack of guile proves most useful. His suspicions would naturally jump straight to Lady Emilia, blaming her with a loud voice. This is where the memories of the people of Earlham Village would come into play. They know of the wave of localized cold that Lady Emilia…well, more precisely, the Great Spirit, can trigger."

Roswaal's statement made a chill run through Subaru. The "wave of localized cold" he spoke of referred to the sight of out-of-season snow occurring alone in the environs of Roswaal Manor.

It was a fun, peaceful time between the people of the mansion and the villagers. Roswaal was using that memory.

—In point of fact, every last thing had gone in accordance with Roswaal's scheme.

Garfiel had suspected Emilia, and his voice propagated that suspicion through the residents of the settlement. The people of Earlham Village would want to believe in her. But they had

memories that associated snow with Emilia.

It was Emilia who had made the snow fall—and every plot of soil in that land, that world, carried a reason to pin every crime upon her, regardless of who might have committed it.

This was the demon named Prejudice, which had caused Emilia so much suffering over many years.

"And do what by isolating Lady Emilia, you ask? Lady Emilia is truly a weak person, you see. It is by no means mysterious for her to entrust herself to the hands of 'someone' who can accept her… And if that someone wished to support Lady Emilia with every fiber of his being, all the better."

"Wait, wait…wait, wait, wait, wait…!"

As Roswaal continued his confession, the words triggered an instinctual fear, prompting Subaru to raise his hands.

He felt like at that moment some preposterous tale, some outrageous fact, was being spoken to him.

As if that moment, he had heard Roswaal's true intent, and having heard it, there was no going back—

"Once Lady Emilia depends upon you, you shall never push her away. Of course not… You love her, after all. If your beloved Lady Emilia entrusts everything to you, you will be unable to brush her aside."

"That's not…"

*No. It can't be true.*

That very moment, the present Subaru had resisted giving in to Emilia when she had clung to him back at the tomb. He had come this far after enduring it. Knowing that those were not Emilia's true feelings, he could not allow himself to drown in feelings of love that were a pale substitute for the real—

"Not today is surely your answer. That is an unfortunate development for me. It would seem that the current you is overly invested in extraneous things."

"Extraneous…? Wait, this is why you did something to my letter…?"

"—Letter?"

Suspicion slipped into Roswaal's question to himself. Though he knit his brows, he immediately cast that suspicion aside.

When Roswaal stepped forward, taking a single step into the pool of blood, Subaru's body subconsciously flinched back. Roswaal, shaking his long arm, flashed a lonely, pained smile at

Subaru's reaction and said; "The current you is insufficient to bring about the future indicated in the text. Any discrepancy with that recorded requires a correction."

"You plan to kill…me?"

"Killing you would be putting the cart before the horse, would it noooot? I would be inconvenienced were you to perish. I mean, I simply must have you seize the next opportunity, no matter what might befall you."

"—Eh?"

For an instant, the words Roswaal said as he approached threw Subaru for a loop. But he immediately grasped what the words meant and, at the same time, recognized their variance with the facts.

Based on some kind of notation in the book of knowledge, Roswaal had caught on to Subaru's looping. However, he did not know that death was the trigger to activate Return by Death.

Accordingly, Roswaal believed he could not kill him until Subaru activated the looping of his own free will. If it was like that, he had a chance to w—

"—I shall not kill you. However, I can do anything to you besides that. Am I wrong?"

The next instant, Subaru was struck by a blow that seemed to go straight through his solar plexus, slamming him into the wall.

*"G-ahh…"*

"Considering how our relationship will develop after this, I would not consider this course of action to be suave of me. Did I use the term correctly?"

*"Goaa! G-gyaaa!"*

Driving his fingernails into the fallen Subaru's flank, Roswaal cocked his head like this was any other regular moment. Rather than the force of his kick, he was using precise gouging at weak points to meticulously increase Subaru's suffering.

And as Subaru writhed in intense pain, Roswaal rained more one-sided acts of violence upon him with punches, kicks, and sometimes a stomp to the head, causing tears of blood to flow out of his left eye cavity once more.

But he didn't die. Therefore, there was no Return by Death. The looping did not occur.

"…I have done all this, and still you will not try again? You are quite obstinate."

“I… I—I…”

“Ahhh, or is this already after you have made another attempt? Now that I think of it, I have no method of recognizing whether you have done it or not. Quite the miscalculation.”

The pitying look Roswaal directed toward Subaru was a spiteful sight indeed. But what tugged at his chest even more than that, something that always had, spilled out of Subaru’s mouth.

“Ros…waal… Y…you talk like I’ve tried again a whole…bunch of times…”

“Oh my? This is becoming a rather important discussion? Do tell.”

“I’m…the one asking you… What’s…with you…acting… planning on the premise that I…that someone else…can redo things? Do you actually…?”

Finally, the terrible premonition that he’d dragged around with him all that time coalesced into a tangible suspicion.

—And that suspicion was that Roswaal had a way to inherit memories.

Just like Echidna, inside the tomb, who spent her time cut off from reality in her castle of dreams, did Roswaal also inherit memories of a prior world even after Subaru Returned by Death?

For if not, Subaru couldn’t make sense of his plan that hinged on redoing things.

“If that’s so…that’s fine. But if that’s really what it is, then I can’t…”

*Can’t forgive you.* If they had both inherited those memories, their relationship could be extended no further.

Roswaal had committed a great many heresies for the sake of an objective unknown to Subaru. This was not limited to the current run but was this man’s policy for every time moving forward as well.

If that was so, the optimal future Subaru was aiming for and his goal were—

“—It would seem that the conversation is at an end…”

However, as Subaru’s broken words trailed off, Roswaal turned his head toward the room’s window. Then, in the corner of the fallen Subaru’s eye, he slightly narrowed his eyes and spoke a single word.

“Goa.”

In contrast to the whisper-like volume of his voice, the result

created by that chant was an all-too-dazzling red.

He unleashed the fist-size crimson fireball created via chant with the speed of an arrow, melting and breaking through the intervening window—and scoring a direct hit on the silhouette seemingly trying to leap into the room through it, burning the target completely.

The silhouette, of a similar size to the fireball, was unable to resist the flames, burning to ash in the blink of an eye. But just before it completely burned away, it left behind only one thing: the sound of its *kii, kii* death cries—

"Just now… *Agh?*"

"I see, I see. —So this is how it ends?"

Subaru gasped as Roswaal grabbed hold of the front of his neck, easily lifting up his body with one slender arm. Subaru groaned and thrashed, but Roswaal paid no heed to his resistance, dragging him to the door. At a rapid gait, he passed out of the house's interior, violently dragging Subaru out of the building and into the cold, buffeting winds outside.

Hurled into the snowy landscape, Subaru shook off something cold touching his head, somehow managing to sit up.

And then he noticed it and gaped.

"

the Sanctuary.

"B-but…this is ridiculous. I mean, it's only the second day… Why is this…?!"

Subaru was sure that according to his memories, the Great Rabbit had attacked the Sanctuary on the fifth day. There should have been plenty of time to spare. Why were they in the Sanctuary with timing like that?

"This snow is no doubt the cause."

"—! Daphne said the Great Rabbit eats magical energy; the bigger the mana the better…!"

During his fleeting encounter with the Witches, the Witch of Gluttony, Daphne, creator and mother of the Great Rabbit, had told Subaru that about the creatures' ecology. He had yet to turn the information about that trait of the Great Rabbit, its attraction to mana, into a means of opposing the menace of the demon beasts, but—

"The snow… There's no reason they can't munch down on the great magic controlling the weather. That's why…!"

"To the Great Rabbit, this is a desirable feeding ground. From birth, those residents with demi-human blood are blessed with bountiful mana… And more important, they and the evacuated villagers are all gathered in one place."

"The Cathedral—!"

As if the conclusion was propelling him, Subaru forced his creaking body to stand. Then, wiping his nosebleed with a sleeve, with the attack of the Great Rabbit imminent, he drew close to Roswaal.

"Roswaal! Right now…just for now, a cease-fire! Anyway, let's get to the Cathedral! Can we hole up there…? No, gotta rendezvous with Emilia at the tomb and flee outside…"

"Flee? To where? There is the barrier. The residents of the Sanctuary cannot escape."

"—. Th-that's…"

"There was not enough time, Subaru. So long as the Trial remains unfinished, the residents cannot leave the Sanctuary. In other words, the future you desire will never come to pass."

As Subaru hemmed, Roswaal pushed his chest away and calmly walked forward.

Ahead of where he advanced, walking over the snow—the Great Rabbit pressed forward as an uncoordinated line of death.

With his might as one of the kingdom's preeminent mages, they couldn't ask for anything more ideal than a target-rich battlefield; numbers meant nothing to him. Surely, with his overwhelming magical strength, he could mow down the horde and open a path.

However, Subaru did not have any sense whatsoever that Roswaal had the willpower to resist.

As he continued to advance, his very demeanor was clearly that of a man going off to his death.

"Wait, wait, damn it, Roswaal…! We aren't done talking yet!"

"No, we are finished. At the very least, I have no more words to speak to you. Nor any reason left to live."

"E-even if I redo it, this way is the worst! If we talked more, talked properly…or maybe you just think you can do it next time, but…!"

"—You seem to have a misconception about something, Subaru."

"Wha?"

The term *misconception* made Subaru's words catch. Standing still, Roswaal turned only his head toward Subaru.

And with Subaru frozen, Roswaal continued speaking to him.

"Even if you can try again, I cannot. The me waiting for you after a redo is not the me you see here. This is my end. —But that is fine."

Bewilderment, amazement, shock slammed into Subaru all at once.

Roswaal himself was saying that redos applied only to Subaru; everything else in the loop was unrelated.

In other words, Roswaal knew of Subaru's looping and was trying to use it for some kind of objective, but what he was doing was no more and no less than that.

For the Roswaal that died there, in that world, his life was over, his consciousness at an end.

He knew that even if Subaru redid things, the current Roswaal would not be waiting on the other end.

But that way of thinking was just too—

"—That's not the thought process of a human being."

With Subaru, whose consciousness continued on, the prerequisite conditions differed.

With Roswaal, whose consciousness did not continue on, if he died it was the end.

And so understanding that end, he accepted it as a matter of fact, inserting it into his plan. That was abnormal.

“At any rate, the time will come when, in a genuine sense, you catch up to me, Subaru.”

“Roswaal…?”

“Listen well, Subaru. —You have something that is important. One thing that is truly, truly precious to you. Strip away all other things. Let go of everything else and think only of protecting that one thing that you hold dear.”

“

bitterness. He bit down on his decision.

It was time. This time he would truly give up on this world, for it was time that he let go.

From hither and yonder, he heard the *kichikichi* sound of the monsters' fangs, captive to their own obsession with hunger.

The Sanctuary was no longer anything more than the Great Rabbit Horde's hunting grounds. Screams and angry shouts alike were drowned out by the demon beasts' cries and the sounds of their gnawing as countless cruel deaths were playing out across that powdery landscape.

Subaru single-mindedly raced past the horrors, running in a beeline to his destination. Surrounded by the sounds of fangs, the flesh-craving rabbits delighted at having new prey enter their feeding grounds. Subaru drew the crystal from his pocket and made one reckless prayer.

Employing his rights as an apostle, Subaru assembled the replicas remaining in the Sanctuary. Leaving it to them to leap in and intercept the demon beasts, Subaru somehow managed to escape with his life.

The remaining replicas dwindled even as he watched. A moment after Piko, the first to come to his side, was sacrificed to the rabbits and torn apart, they ceased being effective as expendable speed bumps. He made them fight until they were being shredded, finally causing them to self-destruct, taking as many as they could with them. This he repeated over and over—

"Ha-ha-ha-ha…"

Coming to a halt, a dry laugh trickled out. Before his eyes was a fire-enveloped building, burning with brilliant flames.

It was the Cathedral. Between the people of Earlham Village and the residents of the Sanctuary, there ought to have been nearly a hundred souls housed inside. Their bastion, the place where survivors should have been waiting for aid, was engulfed by flame.

Possessing nothing save hunger, the Great Rabbit lacked the presence of mind to set its prey on fire. Who, then, had set the fire? For what purpose had—? Without having to think about it, he knew.

The people inside had chosen suicide over being devoured by demon beasts. That was all.

Hell—this was a portrait of Hell itself. The people from the village, the residents of the Sanctuary, and even Ryuzu and Otto

had probably all been inside. How could they do something so hasty?

But Subaru had no right to blame them. They had simply exercised a natural right. They had the right to choose their end—a right Subaru did not possess—and so they chose. That was all.

It was Subaru Natsuki who ought to be blamed. It was he who had made them choose how to end lives that, unlike his, would never return—this was the crime of Subaru Natsuki, a crime he could never undo.

"…Put yourselves on the line and protect me. Once I make it to the tomb, do what you want."

The Great Rabbit began to surround the Cathedral as it burned and collapsed. Sensing their approach, Subaru left only those orders to the remaining Ryuzu replicas—of which there were six.

Shifting his head, Subaru looked not at the scene of the fire but across the snow to where the tomb was supposed to be.

With one step and another, he walked, casting his hesitation aside as he broke into a run.

Behind him, the demon beasts identified the racing Subaru as more prey, their little bodies bounding in pursuit. The replicas did as ordered, fighting without self-regard as they protected him from the beasts.

He heard a chaotic mix of sound from the cries of demon beasts and of the horrifically wounded replicas turning into light and exploding.

Leaving all of it behind, Subaru covered his ears with his hands, continuing to run into the blowing snow.

Countless sounds reached the eardrums of Subaru Natsuki, berating him as they did. He did his best to ignore it and shook them off.

—He continued to run.

## 8

By the time he arrived at the tomb, Subaru's body no longer felt the cold.

He had a cavity for a left eye, and the vision of his right was dying bit by bit. But he thought nothing of the pain.

In his dull, leaden thought process, the image of a single girl flickered.

Stepping into the corridor of dry stone, Subaru headed deeper, deeper within. And there he found—

*“—Subaru?”*

At the back of the corridor was a stone room filled with a faint blue light. From there, someone called his name.

Invited by the voice, his legs dragged him forward, and the person standing in the center of the stone room gazed at Subaru and said, “Subaru, it really is you! Goodness, where have you been? I was worried!”

As she spoke, Emilia rushed over in a small run and grasped both his hands.

Wearing a pouty look, Emilia proceeded to pull Subaru’s hands against her own chest. As gentle softness and body temperature blended together, she gazed at him with upturned eyes.

“…Are you tired by any chance?”

“Yeah… I might be just a little tired…”

“Tee-hee, is that so? Well, in *that* case…”

Nodding, Emilia smiled with redness dying her cheeks. From there, she bent her knees on the spot, leaned on her hip, folded her legs under her, and gave her white thighs a couple of pats.

“…A…lap pillow, huh?”

“Yes. Subaru, you just love my lap pillow, don’t you? You’ve told me as much. I remember.”

Emilia proudly made the proposal with only a tiny hint of a blush. Though it took Subaru a little longer, he also sat down on the spot, indulging in her generosity as he laid his head upon her soft thighs. Right away, the sensation of his hair elicited a sweet murmur of “mmm,” but Emilia immediately began stroking Subaru’s head.

“How many times does this make that I’ve offered Subaru my lap as a pillow anyway?”

“Who knows…third time, maybe? I think I was a real wreck every time.”

“I am happy to indulge Subaru like this, but you know, spoiled children get their hair teased…”

Teasing his forelocks, tickling his forehead with her fingers, Emilia was in high spirits as she did as she pleased to Subaru.

Because Emilia wore that adorable expression, not even a smidgeon of an urge to brush her fingers aside arose.

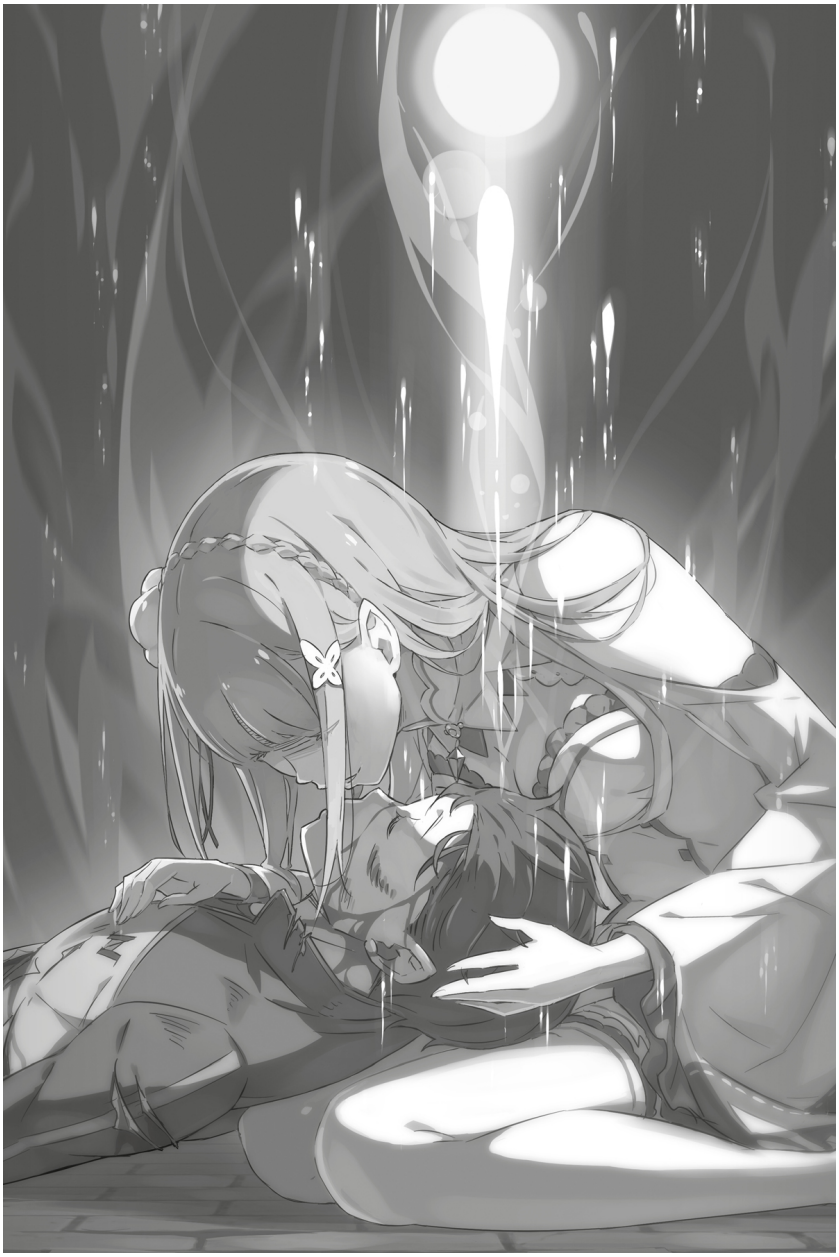
—Besides, he had neither the willpower nor physical endurance

to do so. Most of what should have been in his belly had already spilled out anyway.

“

Emilia didn’t see what was wrong with Subaru. Nor did she notice the change in the Sanctuary, the gradually approaching end, or much of anything else for that matter. —However, perhaps the same was true of Subaru.

“



# CHAPTER 5

## ENDING LIST

**1**

Subaru's consciousness was greeted by the same sensation of a cold, hard floor.

"

did not notice his loss as she kissed him.

He could not imagine what Emilia's mental state was like the moment she kissed Subaru's bloody lips. Nor was Subaru, then on the verge of death, able to bring with him the sensations or feelings from the final moment of his passing.

It would have been the first kiss with Emilia in Subaru's life, and it was death that had gotten in the way.

"

All he had to do was list the problems, obstacles, issues, and walls in his way; clarify his victory conditions; put them in chronological order; then challenge them with trial runs over and over, as many as time and his mind would permit.

Even if Subaru's mind was whittled down with every failure, he would be satisfied so long as a future worth holding on to still existed… No matter how many horrific things he had to see, like what he had already bore witness to.

And so—

"—Emilia, are you all right?"

He stretched out his hand, shook the shoulder of the adorable girl lying on her side, and gently brought her back to reality.

As Subaru watched her long eyelashes tremble and her purple eyes slowly open, he decided.

All over again, he made a vow inside of himself, making it hard and strong so that it would never be broken.

*—I'll protect Emilia and save everyone else. Even if it costs me my life.*

**2**

In his head, he organized the information he never got a chance to digest at the end of the last run, given the chaotic events and his impending death.

The most crucial of this was the man who knew of Subaru's Return by Death—Roswaal L Mathers. Subaru had to consider his position and how to best confront his schemes.

Roswaal did not know that dying was the condition for activating his ability, but he knew that Subaru looped. It was unclear whether he learned this since Subaru's arrival in the Sanctuary or perhaps long before, but the way he found out had to be the magic tome in his possession—the book of knowledge.

This magic tome had the same origin as the blank one Beatrice possessed, one of only two volumes in the world.

Subaru had no idea whether the contents of the tome accurately foretold the future or not. But if he took Roswaal's words at face value, Roswaal had to be acting in accordance with the magical tome's notations.

His words and deeds in the Sanctuary and even his offering his body to the Great Rabbit at the end were the results of his strict

observance of the magic tome—the ideology motivating his actions was similar to what drove the Witch Cultists from Petelgeuse on down.

However, there was a clear difference between the two. An unbridgeable gap existed between the positions from which they obeyed their magic tomes.

Petelgeuse interpreted incomplete prophecies on his own, following the tome's notations while adjusting to changing events on the fly.

Roswaal strictly observed the notations in his tome, permitting no inconsistency with them, not even if events had to be redone as a consequence.

Both fully intended on obeying their tomes, but their motivations and methodologies seemed completely different.

And with Roswaal willing to use even Return by Death for the sake of his tome, Subaru was in an even worse position with him than Petelgeuse.

—Just what was Roswaal's objective, making him resort to such extremes?

If Roswaal's magic tome said to bring the current incidents in the Sanctuary and at the mansion to an end, he'd repeat those tragedies any number of times until things went to his liking.

If that was so, why not just kneel on the ground and have Roswaal tell Subaru what was in the magic tome? Why not just make a firm promise to obey the notations, exhausting his strength until Roswaal's wish was granted?

But as a result of obeying the notations of the magic tome, Roswaal had made the snow fall on the Sanctuary. The snowy landscape had made people suspect Emilia, and her isolation was what caused her so much distress.

If that was Roswaal's…if that was the magic tome's desire, then Subaru absolutely could not obey.

Subaru's and Roswaal's goals were incompatible.

To Subaru, risking his life to carry everything in his arms, Roswaal had spoken.

—Strip away everything except that which is truly important to you, he'd said.

He had also said that in doing so, Subaru would become like him. Not that Subaru wanted to resemble the man even slightly, but it was clear that Roswaal was acting in accordance with those

words, up to and including throwing away his own life.

Strictly obeying his book, he'd isolated Emilia, and Roswaal was firm in the belief that if he reached the conclusion the magic tome desired, he'd be able to protect the one thing that was truly important to him.

All of Roswaal's actions were for the sake of that. If so, Subaru had but one reply.

"Let everything else go, my ass. No way in Hell."

He wouldn't let Emilia be hurt—nor Rem, nor Ram, nor Petra, nor Otto, nor Frederica, nor the people of Earlham Village, nor the residents of the Sanctuary, nor Ryuzu, nor even Garfiel.

If even one of them were to fall, Subaru's small world would become a dreary one. To the greedy, self-centered Subaru, that was something he could not endure.

"Roswaal, I—won't become like you."

To make this declaration true, Subaru had to find an answer that defied the magic tome.

He could rely on no one. Subaru worried, lived, and struggled alone.

But if there was someone somewhere Subaru might rely upon—

"Can I depend on you again…?"

—There was only one Witch in that world to whom Subaru could confide his troubles.

**3**

Subaru quickened his legs, his impatience difficult to endure.

After returning with Emilia, who finished her attempt to clear the Trial at the tomb, the usual review meeting at the Ryuzu residence had also been concluded. With the Sanctuary sunken deep into the dead of night, Subaru was earnestly running alone.

Put bluntly, Subaru didn't remember much of the contents bounced around the review meeting. But he probably didn't need to remember to have a full grasp of the contents.

This time, Emilia was distraught over the past. Therefore, with clumsy explanations and it being clear at a glance she was forcing herself, she tearfully vowed to challenge her nightmare again tomorrow and thereafter.

Subaru respected her sense of duty and the nobility of her resolve. —But she would fail. This he knew.

Accordingly, Subaru consoled the hurt Emilia, gently encouraged her, and saw her off to bed. After that, when Ram went to call him for his promised talk with Roswaal, Subaru brushed her off and rushed out of the house.

Breath ragged, brow sweaty, he headed straight toward the Witch's moonlit tomb—there lay the key to dealing with the situation, and even if not, there rested an ally with whom he could resolve some of the issues that troubled him.

He was worried that he'd be stopped as he ran to the tomb, but fortunately neither Ryuzu, nor Garfiel, nor Roswaal had interrupted his decisive move.

—That night, for the second time, the third if counting during the day, he charged toward the tomb.

"

tow—and it had also been nearly one short hour since Subaru had died in that place and that the world had restarted through Return by Death.

In that place of Subaru's anguish, Subaru's death and resurrection, he yearned for an audience with the Witch.

"Please call me, Echidna…!"

He'd thrown his life away over and over. If casting away his pride as well was sufficient, he'd offer even that.

For displaying his pathetic nature with all his strength was all the ignorant, powerless Subaru Natsuki was capable of.

"

Subaru's emotions rocked back and forth in a way that made him feel drunk.

He didn't know what had happened. His consciousness had given out, and after that, his awakening was sudden.

It resembled the confusion linked to the sudden shift between times present and past when Return by Death activated. His brain was in chaos when suddenly dealing with the difference between the world from the moment prior and the world that instantly appeared at that moment.

When he realized it was a confusion that he was already familiar with, recovery was an easy feat.

Taking a long, deep breath, he first told his racing thoughts and beating heart to calm down. —But he did not feel the mouth, the throat, or the lungs necessary to take that deep breath.

*"—?"*

With a hand, he tried to confirm that the parts he couldn't feel were actually there. He could not touch them. The reason was simple: He couldn't feel his hand, either. —No, it wasn't just his hand. His head, his body—that moment—they did not exist for Subaru.

—All he had was his consciousness; he existed as consciousness alone.

Subaru's consciousness was alone in the sky, an existence that retained only his vision from his commanding view of the world.

The unnatural lack of his flesh and blood generated a new kind of confusion. However, by thinking of the nonexistent organs and remembering the concept of a deep breath, he instilled an imitation of calm into his heart.

Brushing aside his bewilderment and his sense of intoxication, he earnestly strove to grasp the present circumstance. —Beneath those thoughts, Subaru sought to ascertain where he was and what he was doing.

"—aru."

Abruptly, there was a voice. It was a broken, small voice.

It was such a frail voice that it was difficult to hear just what it had said.

And yet, Subaru instinctively knew.

—This was a voice to which he must not listen, must not notice:

a voice he must ignore.

However, that was not possible.

Without a body, Subaru was not permitted to turn his head aside or even to close his eyes.

He was permitted nothing, save to watch the scene from so very close, to burn it into his consciousness.

He was a fool. He should have welcomed the confusion. That intoxication was the mercy of God himself—

"Liar…liar, liarliarliarliarliar…!"

As the word repeated itself, he heard clearly what he initially could not; the voice became more apparently tearful.

It was a painful sight. He could hear the unendurable misery in the voice. Among the sufferings of that world, to lend his eyes to this, for his ears to hear this, that was what he had feared most.

Why was he here? Why did he notice that he was *there*?

He'd failed. He'd miscalculated. He'd made a mistake. His judgment had been faulty. He should not have noticed. It was not for him to know. It was not something he ought to have learned. After all—

*—If only I hadn't thought there's no way that could happen.*

"Liar, liar! Subaru…you liar! You liar—!!"

Tears poured out of her purple eyes like a faucet, Emilia crumpling as she yelled in a shrill voice.

She shouted as if accusing him of betrayal, as if a nightmare had appeared before her very eyes, her long hair swaying about like that of a child. Emilia cried and shouted as if she had gone mad.

On the bed, lying beside Rem, was Subaru, dead from running a short blade through his own throat.

**5**

*—What the hell am I seeing right now?*

"

Subaru that was no longer anything but an empty shell. It was immeasurably repulsive. Never had he known a more terrifying scene.

Even Subaru, whose deaths had already exceeded ten, never once had such a commanding view of his own death.

He was experiencing something as never before: Emilia grieving over him.

“

—Subaru Natsuki's world would shatter.

*"Stop it. Stopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopitstopitpleas estopit…!"*

Unable to accept the scene playing out before his eyes, Subaru sent up an incoherent scream.

However, his voice did not project from his throatless form, and he could not turn his eyeless face away, nor block out sound from his earless head. The end of that world was being inscribed into Subaru, now nothing save a consciousness.

—This was punishment for the rash act Subaru had committed.

"Lady Emilia! This is—"

As he listened to Emilia's voice cry and shout, someone rushed into the room with a sharp voice.

He had white hair and wore a black butler's outfit. This was the Crusch manor in the royal capital. Wilhelm the "Sword Devil," who very much belonged there, took in the tragic scene, his eyes widening in horror.

For his part, the consciousness-only Subaru was almost beside himself at the sight of the aged swordsman in shock. That was how much Wilhelm was thrown off balance by Subaru's corpse lying before him.

"Subaru… Subaruuu…you liar… You said we'd be together…"

"What has happ— No, Lady Emilia, forgive me!"

Emilia blamed him for his betrayal like she was casting a curse. Her sobbing voice pulling Wilhelm back to his senses, he gently peeled Emilia away as she clung to Subaru's body. Emilia proceeded to wobble and fall onto the floor. But Wilhelm was more concerned with resuscitating Subaru than with her.

"Ferris! Felix! Come quickly! It is urgent! Utmost urgency!!"

Quickly stripping his jacket off and pressing it to the wound, Wilhelm forcefully shouted with a grave look on his face. Slamming Subaru's chest in an attempt to coax his still heart to beat again, droplets of blood smeared his terrible visage.

Too much blood had coursed out. A man who had seen as much death as the Sword Devil surely knew Subaru's soul was no longer present. Even so, his efforts to resuscitate Subaru did not relent.

"Old Man Wil, why're you raising your voice like… Eh?"

"Felix, hurry! A blade has pierced his throat! Not a second to lose!"

When Ferris appeared, Wilhelm instantly conveyed the facts in

a sharp voice. Ferris enshrouded his palm with a blue luminance, and this great quantity of mana became healing power that he poured into the prone Subaru's wound.

As he attempted treatment, desperate concentration gripped Ferris like never before. Subaru's consciousness lamented as he looked down, watching them attempt to resuscitate an empty, soulless shell.

*"Just stop already… It's no use. It's just no use. He's already dead…"*

The result was already obvious. Subaru had died there.

No matter how desperately they might try, no matter how much Emilia might cry, Subaru was dead.

Thinking nothing of what would happen after his death, forgetting everything else, he'd selfishly died.

"You will not perish! Absolutely not… As if I could let he who aided me die like this?!"

"How could you, at a time like this…? Stop messing around, just stop it…!!"

Wilhelm shouted as he compulsively applied pressure on the wound; Ferris's voice trembled with anger as he employed the kindest magic in the world.

The scene and the waves of emotion from both of them continued to crash against Subaru's heart.

But no matter how earnestly the pair might strive—

"Felix! Why?! Why have you stopped the treatment! At this rate, he'll…"

"It's over, Old Man Wil. —There's nothing of the soul left here."

As Wilhelm drew close, Ferris shook his head, gently wiping with a handkerchief the wound that the jacket had plugged. The scar had been sealed so neatly that, as he wiped it, there was no sign of there ever having been a wound at all.

But a great quantity of blood had flowed out, and the soul that had slipped out was nowhere to be found.

"Why…why?!! Why, Sir Subaru…how could you do this so easily…!"

Looking down upon Subaru's dead face, Wilhelm formed a fist of regret, pounding it against the floor.

The floor split and fragmented, blood mixing with those shards Wilhelm's fist had split along as well. With blood dripping from his hand, Wilhelm raised his face to the heavens in lamentation.

In contrast to Wilhelm's raw, ferocious emotions, Ferris let out a little exhale and said, "…Weakling, coward. Everyone has precious people leave them, don't they? …Pushing all your pain and hardship onto everyone else… Are you satisfied with that?"

As sarcasm, it was harsh. As an accusation, it was all too charitable.

Having abandoned all comprehension, Subaru's consciousness could not decipher such a complex state of mind. But from Wilhelm's and Ferris's demeanor, one thing was perfectly clear.

—Subaru had carved deep, lasting wounds upon their hearts.

"

Murmuring with a trembling voice, his gaze wandered as he confirmed his own location. Suddenly, he was there in the room of the Trial he had surely been in until just before losing consciousness, having in no way leaped beyond it in either time or space.

Emilia wasn't there, either. He hadn't Returned by Death. He was there right after his wish had come.

"But that was…no daydream or anything close…"

Putting a hand to his mouth, Subaru felt every inner organ spasm at once at the scene burned into the core of his mind.

It was an unanticipated scene, an impossible world, a nonexistent stage that he had surely left behind—that was unmistakably the "Scene After Subaru's Death."

*"U…bu—"*

The instant his comprehension redoubled, his trembling intestines reached their limit, and the contents of Subaru's stomach were expelled.

A supper of which he had only a distant memory of eating spewed onto the floor along with his stomach fluids. It was no great amount. Even so, wringing his stomach repeatedly made him feel a small easing of his nausea.

"Haah, haah… Th-this is…"

After vomiting repeatedly, Subaru moaned from the burning pain of stomach fluids in his throat as he sank into thought.

What the heck had happened? Had Subaru, seeking an invitation to the castle of dreams, fallen into some sort of aberrant situation? Given the place, if he had to put his finger on a possibility, the only one that came to mind was—

"Wait, don't tell me that was the Trial just now…? Not the one of the past but the second one…?!"

This was the room of the Trial inside the tomb of the Witch—so having cleared the first gate, it was natural for there to be a second. It was only natural, but to Subaru, this natural thing was exceedingly unexpected.

Of course, that went for not just the Trial starting; the most frightening thing of all was the Trial's contents.

—If what he'd seen earlier was the second Trial, to Subaru, it was the worst development possible.

When it came to Hell, Subaru had seen it repeatedly. He was well aware of the fact.

And to grasp an optimal future, he'd resigned himself to seeing that Hell as many times as it took.

—But how could he maintain his determination after learning of something that went beyond Hell, something more terrifying than Hell itself?

*"—Behold the unknowable present."*

"Wha—?!"

Subaru could practically feel his blood freezing as his body trembled. Someone's whisper had suddenly grazed his eardrums.

Raising a cry at that fact, his body stiffened and that instant—the loss of consciousness came once more.

He thrust out his arms, but they could not hold on to anything. Falling shoulder-first onto the floor, he could not force his eyelids open. His consciousness proceeded to rapidly fall into the abyss and vanish.

—So that the Trial and the world beyond Hell might chastise Subaru Natsuki.

**7**

Shallowly, sharply, the blade that brought his life to an end was so elegant it was enchanting.

The minimal bleeding was proof of the precise skill with which the single fatal blow was landed. But specks of that minute blood spatter remained on his white mantle, which looked akin to proof of the knight's crime.

As Subaru's remains lay faceup, a purple-haired knight looked down upon them. To his side, Ferris had sunken down to the ground on his backside, and it was clear at a glance he was in an exceedingly haggard state.

"

And this scene, too, kicked Subaru when he was— No, the blow that came was even greater than what had preceded it.

“…Su…baru?”

With a sound of footsteps on grass, someone was approaching the encirclement formed by the knights. With wobbly steps, this individual walked closer to the boy lying fallen at its center.

In a daze, Emilia stood beside the deceased Subaru. Beside her stood a knight—Julius.

“Lady Emilia, please wipe his…Subaru’s face.”

“

death.

Ferris's magic had greatly disrupted the circulation inside his body, and Subaru's demise had left a terrible expression on his face. It was thanks to Julius's intervention that Subaru had averted a horrific appearance in death.

But if the question was whether this was any comfort to those left behind, that was a different story.

"Sir Subaru… I am so very sorry…!"

Wilhelm, his entire body covered with wounds, fell to his knees and lowered his head in shame.

Pushing his wounded body, Wilhelm wept grandly over Subaru's death. As he lowered his face with an expression of regret, aged knights stood around him, wearing similar faces of silent pain.

Each was one of the comrades in battle with whom Subaru had challenged the White Whale. Having struck down the Witch Cult, they had promised each other a triumphant return to the royal capital, and the hearts of all were pained to be unable to fulfill that promise; some among them were driven to tears.

Subaru gaped at to just what extent they were afflicted by his death.

Or perhaps those tears struck Subaru so hard because he was seeing them from the world after death.

"Why did Subaru come to help me, only to end up like this…? Why did this happen?"

With Subaru saying nothing in return, Emilia kept a hand pressed to his cheek, continuing to call out to him in a voice that could not reach.

From that sad and painful sight, Subaru knew very well what was within her chest. In that world, Subaru had not given an answer to Emilia's question. In death, it had been postponed for all eternity.

—Accordingly, going forward, Emilia would never know the reason for Subaru's devotion.

"The Witch Cult has long brought suffering to this world. Its vanguard, the Archbishop of the Deadly Sins of Sloth, has been slain. To the world, this is an exceptional victory. —But."

Speaking to Subaru's remains, Julius used his fingers to rap the scabbard of the knight's sword on his hip. He repeated the gesture over and over, the intervals between them gradually shortening.

"That does not mean all the sacrifices for its sake are

pardonable. —I had hoped to exchange more words with you, Subaru Natsuki.”

With that painful murmur, Julius averted his face from Subaru’s dead visage.

Lifting his face toward the sky dyed by the setting sun, gloom rested in the knight’s eyes as he said, “—I wanted to call you friend.”

Julius’s whisper in a powerless voice trickled into the forest in vain.

## 8

The world’s stage lights suddenly turned off, and his consciousness returned. He awoke with a start.

“—Bwha, whaa! Whu, ah, ahhh?!”

His body writhed. When he came to, he found his body atop a cool, hard floor.

In that room, filled with air chilly enough to make his nostrils hurt, Subaru lost himself as he rolled around. There was no meaning behind the action. Through actions made in a frenzy, he wanted to reject having to think about anything.

He could not allow himself to think about what he had just seen. He could not allow himself to comprehend.

He rolled and rolled, making his inner ear hurt as he scraped his head against the floor, as if trying to escape the storm spawned from his own internal organs. He tried to reduce the possibility of conscious thought by even the tiniest degree.

“Gah…!!”

But as he evaded reality in that manner, he bumped into the wall, and his bounce off it brought that process to an end.

The hard collision by his back made his bones creak, and his forehead was oozing blood from all the scraping against the ground. Yet, as he lay facedown, it was most certainly not the pain that had caused Subaru’s tears to flow.

—Subaru’s sobs were for the shame he felt toward his spineless self.

Just how often, how many times over, would Subaru Natsuki’s weakness continue to torment him?

Just how could he obtain a heart of steel that would never, ever waver, no matter the predicament, no matter the ordeal?

It was because Subaru was so weak, so frail, that so many times before he'd…

"The stuff I pretended not to see, the stuff I turned my back on… That's what this is…?"

It wasn't…that he had never thought about it.

The possibility had floated up in a corner of Subaru's mind a number of times.

The fact that he'd made no attempt to seriously come to grips with it was nothing save himself subconsciously rejecting any verification of the possibility, any inquiry into it, all out of fear.

The idea that when Subaru Returned by Death, the worlds continued after his demise—if he openly considered the possibility, if he even suspected it, the foundation of how Subaru fought would crumble under his feet.

That Subaru, wishing to save others, had been left behind by everyone.

—No, it was Subaru who had left them behind. Shamefully, selfishly embracing his own death, Subaru left the world behind, as only he escaped into a brand-new world.

His irresponsibility had borne terrible fruit. That was the truth behind those scenes, what had created Hell beyond Hell itself.

*"—Behold the unknowable present."*

*You can't escape*, the whispering voice close to Subaru's ears seemed to declare.

The forced estrangement of his consciousness that differed from sleep made Subaru fall into a world of white.

When the whisper ended for the third time, he wondered why the voice sounded familiar—then he realized the answer.

—Without the slightest doubt, the voice he heard…was his own.

## 9

There was a girl. She was kneeling in front of a corpse with its skull smashed apart.

Unable to withstand a fall from a great height, the corpse had bloomed upon the ground as a flower of blood. From the fragments

that had cruelly flown apart, it was barely discernible that this had once been a black-haired boy.

“

which to do so—

"I knew that…at the least, you weren't That Person…but…"

With all expression vanished, Beatrice seemed delirious, teardrops continuing to fall as she murmured.

Apparently the sight was so painful that it convinced Ram to abandon pressing Beatrice any further. She simply let out a quiet sigh, turning scornful eyes toward Subaru and murmured softly as she took in his spectacular demise.

"What 'love.' —Truly, this is a helpless tale."

**10**

*"—Behold the unknowable present."*

**11**

The atmosphere was dyed white. The world was ruled by such cold it seemed as if the very nighttime sky might freeze.

As the wind blew, frozen trees cracked and broke apart, returning to dust as the mana required for maintaining the forest's existence was sucked from it.

The trees, the buildings, the living creatures, the world itself were slowly vanishing into that white end.

"

size so great, he actually had to look *up* at it.

However, the fangs set in the giant beast's maw had been snapped and broken, and its repeated, heavy breaths carried a heavy air of fatigue. However, it glared straight in front of it with the eyes of brilliant gold, the only part that still retained tremendous vigor.

"How unfortunate… Even knowing it would come to this, I cannot alter the result?"

"—I have a general grasp of what must have happened… The pity is all the greater."

As the great beast's voice seemed to lament aloud, a serene, beautiful voice replied, unhesitant even amid the blowing snow.

It was but one corner of an ending world, yet the voice was in no way lacking in vitality. The speaker's tall frame stood with a straight posture, a youth whose burning-red hair swayed in the white wind.

The youth stared at the beast with eyes that evoked a clear blue sky, faint sadness dwelling in that gaze.

"Neither Lady Emilia nor Subaru are anywhere to be seen."

"Ria sleeps for eternity. A world without that girl is a world I do not want to exist. Thus, in accordance with the pact, I will make this a world of frozen soil. I and that man share this crime—"

"So that is your reason for trying to destroy this world?"

"I knew you would try to prevent it. But if I do not do this, that girl cannot be saved."

When the beast made that ferociously growling reply, the youth shook his head a little, grasping the hilt of the sword on his hip. Its white scabbard bore claw marks engraved into it, proof this was the legendary sword left behind by the Dragon long ago—the Dragon Sword.

In that world, there was but a single person who could draw, who could wield the dazzling, gleaming Dragon Sword.

The Sword Saint, Reinhard von Astrea, raised the Dragon Sword, boldly training it toward the enormous beast.

"I understand your regrets. I feel the same way. However, I cannot allow you to blindly lash out because of those feelings. Your vow wounds the world itself. —That is something I absolutely cannot forgive."

"Because it is not just?"

"Yes, because it is not just. —Justice is my standard. My

sword…exists to right wrongs. For that reason, I shall cut you down here and now, O Great Spirit."

There was an overwhelming difference of mass between the great beast and the youth—between Puck and Reinhard.

In spite of this, even Subaru knew from a single glance, which possessed the greater combat strength between them.

Even Puck with his true power unleashed could not cause the serenity of Reinhard's face to falter. With a single slash from the Dragon Sword, the Sword Saint could sever even this spirit in half.

The sheer immensity of the swordsman's spirit gushing into the surrounding area made that loud and clear.

"If you do not move, I solemnly promise you will not suffer."

"That I cannot do. I will struggle for the sake of my vow until my life expires…for as long as I live."

The Dragon Sword audibly vibrated, letting up a terrifying aura that seemed to make the frozen air crack and cry out for mercy. Before that overwhelming power, the fallen, enormous beast stood up on its front legs, forcing its body up onto its paws, baring its fangs.

Together, they both adopted a stance to land a single blow, one final duel, the result of which was already clear—

"I must prevent you from inflicting any further damage. If you must hate someone, hate me."

"I do not resent you, Reinhard. You…you are a hero. A hero has only the role of a hero to play. I neither blame nor resent you for resigning yourself to that fact."

"

the cracked air. From the sky, dazzling sunrays poured down.

The slash of the Sword Saint had both ended the world and simultaneously brought about its re-creation—

And the enormous beast that had been bathed in that slash had been annihilated from the world without a trace. There were not even side effects of destruction to be seen; that a battle had even taken place seemed like nothing but a dream.

—With a rasping sound, Reinhard sheathed the Dragon Sword within its white scabbard once more.

As the passing breeze rustled through his red hair, Reinhard narrowed his eyes at the sunlight and lifted his face to the sky. His lips faintly stiffened, and as he exhaled, he whispered too faintly for any to hear—

"—Lady Felt shall surely…be sad."

The Sword Saint closed his eyes with a final whisper.

**12**

*"—Behold the unknowable present."*

**13**

*"—Behold the unknowable present."*

**14**

*"—Behold the unknowable present."*

**15**

*"—Behold the unknowable present."*

**16**

*"—Behold the unknowable present."*

**17**

*"—Behold the unknowable present."*

**18**

*“—Behold the unknowable present.”*

**19**

*“—Behold the unknowable present.”*

**20**

—He beheld the unknowable presents.

Shown one finished world after the next, Subaru could do nothing but lie flat upon the floor.

He did not know at that moment where he was.

Was he in reality? Was he within the dream? Was he consciousness alone? Did he have a body? Having repeated those nightmares… Was it right to even call them nightmares? Or was this his crime, the reality he had to accept?

Were they mere hallucinations of possibilities? Or had he truly seen a Hell beyond Hell itself?

Or maybe convenient worlds had been created from Subaru’s memories once again? Then how had information from after Subaru’s death, which Subaru clearly did not know, trickled into them?

Were they really false worlds borne from delusions? Or was his reality being consumed by a different reality?

No matter what the answer might be, Subaru had taken a tremendous blow to his psyche—enough that he was unable to face it head-on, to stand, to even lift his head.

That was why—

“—Goodness, can you even stand anymore? Subaru.”

He heard someone standing beside him, someone gently trying to rescue his battered mind.

It felt like a lovely voice, one that belonged to someone precious to him.

“—Ah.”

Subaru’s cheek felt a hot teardrop, one that should never have

flowed, trickling down his cheek.

—How long had it been since he had heard that voice ring in his ears?

In terms of actual days, the time that she had been asleep was not truly so great. At most, it had been a week's time since acquaintances and family had laid eyes upon her face.

—And yet, it did not seem that way to Subaru. It felt like they had parted eons ago.

To Subaru, who had gone back at the cost of his life over and over, the actual passage of time held no meaning. What was important was the moments experienced by his soul.

And it had truly been a great deal of time since his soul had heard her voice.

"Subaru, are you all right?"

The voice whispered lovingly, consolingly, compassionately.

The familial love, the passion with which her call was infused, quickly quenched Subaru's parched heart.

The vessel of his heart, empty and surely sinking into the void, became filled with warmth.

All it had taken was a single sentence—just how much strength did she grant him?

"—It's a lie."

"No, it is not a lie."

"You can't be here."

"If you want me to be, I will always be at your side, Subaru."

"As if, just when I most think, I want someone to do something, anything…as if you'd always be there for me… Things aren't convenient like…!"

"Because I am always thinking, I want to be the most convenient woman of all for Subaru."

With a sobbing voice and unsightly, weak sounds, he fell to pieces.

And yet, even with his hollowness laid bare, that voice would never look down on Subaru, never lose faith in him.

Because she knew.

She knew that Subaru was weak, helpless; so fragile and lacking in confidence that he had to cling to something just to get by; someone who continued to hesitate.

For she was the girl who knew Subaru was not strong yet had said to him anyway, "I love you."

“—Rem.”

“Yes. I am Subaru’s Rem.”

He lifted his face. In his tear-blurred vision, the color blue filtered in. Violently rubbing his eyes with his dirty sleeve, wiping away his tears, Subaru saw perfectly clearly.

He saw, standing before his eyes—the sight of Rem that he had yearned for so desperately.

“Remmm…”

“Yes, I am Rem. Subaru’s personal, dutiful, all-purpose maid.”

“Why, you…”

With a little tilt of her head, Rem’s playful manner blindsided Subaru.

Faced with such behavior from her, before Subaru could say anything, he felt something heavy fall out from inside his chest. His breathing eased, and the pessimistic voice inside of him vanished.

Subaru was dumbfounded at how easily—so easily indeed—he had been saved.

His mind, battered and broken down, thinking that he was at a dead end, had been freed of its bonds with such ease from nothing more than one girl’s smile.

“Rem, you’re incredible…”

“Thank you very much. You are wonderful too, Subaru.”

With that smiling reply, the way she spoke out of sync was so familiar that it was if she was perfectly in tune, just like always.

That nostalgic exchange left Subaru near tears, seemingly unable to hold them back no matter how hard he tried.

Still lying flat on the floor, Subaru’s cheeks twitched as Rem knelt before him.

“Are you all right? Are you tired?”

“I wonder…am I tired…? Even though…I still haven’t… accomplished anything yet…”

He had accomplished nothing. He had done nothing. He had no right to say he was tired.

Everyone was suffering more. Everyone was going through more agony. Why did everyone have to suffer like that? —The answer was clear.

“It’s because I’m weak.”

“

“If I was stronger, if I was wiser, if I was a man who could do more…no one would have to suffer, to be sad, to go through hard times like that…”

It would have been so much better if Subaru had been strong enough to do everything, all of it, alone.

Emilia’s sadness, Beatrice’s loneliness, the calamity befalling Petra and Frederica, the menace of the Great Rabbit, Garfiel, who was desperately protecting something… He should have been able to do…something.

Everything, all of it, every last bit of it was Subaru’s fault.

That was why, to balance out his weakness, Subaru had to pay by shaving away his life. —That was what he’d thought, and yet…

“Have I saved…anyone…?”

“Subaru.”

“If those worlds continued after my death, how many times I have I abandoned everyone to die?”

“Subaru.”

“How many times…did I make you die? How many times…do I have to kill you?”

With rapid words, with fear from the depths of his body making him tremble, Subaru confessed his crimes.

He wanted to vent it all, to lay everything bare that very moment. Before he whittled away his mind, he wanted someone at his side—someone qualified to do so—to pass judgment on his crime.

Deciding in his heart, *no more mistakes* he’d marched off on his path mistaken from the very first step. He wanted that great and foolish bastard, that fool beyond redemption, to get a walloping. “—Subaru.”

“—Ah.”

—And yet, Subaru, seeking punishment, was granted a gentle embrace of forgiveness.

“Re…m.”

“It’s all right. It’s all right, Subaru.”

“What is…? What’s all right…? No way, it’s…!”

Subaru had accomplished nothing. Not one single thing.

There were many people who could not be saved unless Subaru saved them. There were many with terrible ends awaiting them. Even Rem was someone Subaru had to save.

It was she who had the right to blame Subaru Natsuki—that

insufficient, weak fool—for falling short.

“You’re…you should be…!”

“—I love you.”

Touching their foreheads together, she simply whispered her love.

“

she was trying to do. He wondered if it would be right to let her do it, to let her fasten him, laden him, for him to drown, to dissolve, to sink…

—Whether it was right or wrong, Rem would forgive it, wouldn't she?

His emotions were frayed, his confused soul wanted someone to reach out to him, and in that moment, Rem, who understood everything about Subaru, was saving him once more.

To Subaru the powerless, Subaru the fragile, Subaru the foolish, Rem was lending her strength.

If by indulging in that, clinging to that, nestling against that, he arrived at the correct answer, then…

He'd been worn away, no longer knowing which path to walk, not even knowing which way to turn. So he'd yield; he'd give up on anything and everything—

*"It is easy to give up."*

*"However…"*

*"—It does not suit you, Subaru."*

He heard a voice.

"—Subaru?"

He heard Rem's coming from the front, seemingly questioning him.

In addition, her face, presumably on the verge of closing the gap between their lips so that they might touch, was being obstructed by Subaru's hand.

Gazing at the flicker in her wavering, light blue eyes between the gaps of his fingers, Subaru spoke.

"—Who are you?"

"…Eh?"

"I'm asking you, who are you?"

"S-Subaru, what are…? Who, that's just…"

When Subaru asked that in a low voice, Rem shook her head defensively, seemingly out of fear.

The hurt look that had floated into her eyes thickened, and she clutched at Subaru's chest with a pained expression.

As if to twist that pain deeper, Subaru put a hand to his own chest, baring his fangs.

With a fleeting encounter that should never have been, rescue that should never have been granted, the entirety of Subaru Natsuki's soul was—

"If ever I…got in a jam I couldn't get out of, if I seriously wanted someone to do something, anything for me, when I wanted to give up… From the bottom of my heart, I thought that you would be there for me."

"

different. Rem just couldn't watch Subaru in pain like that and wanted to help him… That is all!!"

"I'll show you my weakness. I'll show you my vulnerabilities. I'll even show you how I'm a petty, irredeemable bastard. —But the one thing I won't show you is me giving up."

Rem had once said…Subaru was her hero.

And Subaru Natsuki had decided to be Rem's hero.

Ever since the moment that promise was exchanged, Subaru Natsuki had decided.

—In that world, Subaru Natsuki would show his weakness to Rem alone.

Only before Rem, who knew Subaru was weak and yet believed he would overcome that and be strong, would Subaru display his weakness, concealing nothing.

He would not show that to anyone else, not even to Emilia, not even to Beatrice.

Subaru, who had to be strong, could not show his weakness to anyone save Rem.

"That's because my weakness belongs to her. It's because my Rem has my weakness covered up so tight that even if I might flirt with giving up, it never comes out."

"

What greatly resembled Rem in appearance alone vanished, and the face of an unfamiliar girl appeared in its stead.

The girl had long light pink hair and somehow gave off a fragile impression. Her face was very refined, but rather than standout beauty, what she possessed was an uncommonly adorable appearance.

A muffler was wrapped around her neck, long enough that its end seemed to touch the ground, matching the white clothing with sleeves long enough to cover her up to the wrists; from this, he inferred that she was highly averse to exposing of her skin.

In fact, Subaru's gaze made her lower her face, as if she was fearful of the eyes of men.

"Who…the heck are you?"

"I'm C-Carmilla…? Th-the Witch of Lust… P-pleased to meet… you."

The reply the girl—Carmilla—gave to his question made Subaru unwittingly suck in his breath.

Not that the absurd phenomenon hadn't made him think it, but —

"This nonsensical space…it's Echidna's dream?"

"Close but…incorrect…I think. Echidna is watching the Trial, so…the Trial is always like a dream, so……yeah."

"

that…… It—it is because you looked at me?”

“What?”

“I—I didn’t…want to do this, but Echidna……sh-she lied to me…”

As Carmilla murmured in a broken manner, Subaru realized just what was ticking him off about her.

The way she spoke, how her gaze wandered, the frailty with which she lowered her eyes as she looked back at him… All of it rubbed him the wrong way. What was she pulling with the clumsy words and the pouty demeanor?

“Did you…did you realize what you were doing to me…?”

“Echidna…said it was all right to pamper you, but…d-don’t…”

“—!! Listen to me!!”

“Th-this is why everyone…b-bullies me… That’s—that’s right. Echidna did it, too. Making me do this terrible…so terrible…”

“Didn’t you get it the first time when I said to listen—?!!”

Anger dyed his vision. He wanted to make the woman before him pay. The fury filling his chest was roasting him. His angry voice was raspy, his lungs hot. He was fed up.

Subaru wanted to shut up by force the squeamish, squirmy mouth continuing to spout those tearful words, to pound the anger he harbored into her, to make her understand what she had done—

“—Any more, and your life will be in peril.”

“

Had the voice saved him? Even if it did, should he just politely accept that?

With that thought, Subaru, now on all fours, lifted his face. He glared straight ahead at the face of the individual sitting there, the very one who had engendered that situation.

“What the hell were you scheming—Echidna?”

Seeing that hate-imbued gaze, the white-haired Witch calmly stroked her own hair.

Sitting in a white chair at a white table on a field of grass, she laid her cheek against her palm with a charming, suggestive smile as she said, “Isn’t it obvious? Wicked deeds. —I am a Witch, you know.”

Echidna winked as she spoke.

# CHAPTER 6

## THE WITCHES' TEA PARTY

**1**

As Subaru writhed, his breathing painful, he realized that at some point the scenery had shifted to a grassy plain.

His nostrils were filled with the thick scent of grass coming from the ground where he squatted. Like just after a rainfall, the sun poured down from above; Subaru's entire body was enveloped by natural aromas, the scents almost chokingly cloying.

Atop that green hill, Echidna waited in her natural state of being, preparations for the tea party already complete.

In her natural state, just like usual. —Just like usual.

"I am guessing you have various things you wish to say, things you wish to ask me…but first how about we begin with you sitting and having a cup of tea?"

"…Do you really think I can just shrug off what you did to me just now and sit over there?"

"I do. You are capable of putting calculated rationality first, as opposed to allowing anger to throw your opportunity to waste. You would rather speak with me than push me away… This is the internal decision you have already made, yes?"

"

“From earlier…if that was Lust doing her own thing, not what you actually intended her to do, say it. Say you’re sorry. If you do that, I won’t find fault with you.”

He presented his case to Echidna. To go any further, Subaru required her intellect, her cooperation.

Even so, he could not forgive the unforgivable. After all, the fact remained that Echidna had used Carmilla to trample on an inviolable Sanctuary of Subaru’s own.

Hence, it was necessary, both for the sake of forgiving Echidna and to bring himself to sit at her tea party.

“…I wonder how to best put this…”

And in that single instant, she no doubt fully comprehended the weakness and conflict inside Subaru’s heart.

Echidna let a faint exhale trickle out, and as Subaru awaited her reply, she narrowed her black eyes and said, “It is as you said. That was all Carmilla running amok. I tried to stop her, but she refused to listen to me. She used the Trial as an excuse to begin a stage play in an attempt to ensnare you.”

“

Trial thrusting that deeply into you was beyond my imagination.”

“

somehow came off as acting…stubborn. And then the anger he had harbored for the Witch in his mind until a moment before seemed so shallow and misplaced.

In point of fact, without Echidna's aid—though he hesitated to use that term for an impersonation of Rem—Subaru's mind would have no doubt shattered and carried away by the winds.

Surely, once his mind was ruined, he would completely lose all means with which to resist and become unable to fight.

Echidna had prevented that beforehand. —He could not convey gratitude toward her. However, this was not behavior that warranted being showered in vitriol and insults. This would serve as their common ground.

"…Let me say just one thing."

"—Ah."

Standing up, Subaru went over and took a seat at the tea party atop the hill. Seeing this, Echidna let a tiny breath trickle out, and from the very slight slackening of the corners of her eyes, he knew.

Relief was the water that had washed a little of the worry off her face.

Therefore, Subaru glared at the Witch's face and spoke.

"I won't drink any Dona Tea. —But I'll take you up on a conversation."

**2**

"I understand what it is you most wish to know. Shall I explain about the Trial, then?"

With Subaru having sat down for the tea party, Echidna proposed a topic, seemingly to demonstrate her sincerity to him.

He had no objections to the contents. When Subaru nodded in assent, Echidna gently lifted up a finger.

"Just like the first Trial, the second Trial is, to put it bluntly, a construct. Those worlds are reproduced from your memories, gathering together various conditions that exist within your memory, and from information about past, present, and future, a fictitious 'now' is created, nothing more."

"In other words, those were…"

"However well fashioned, they were not reality. Their cohesiveness ran far ahead of my expectations, but those worlds are 'constructs' nonetheless. It does not mean that, in fact, such worlds

exist."

"Then!"

"However—"When Subaru tried to see hope in her explanation, Echidna's logical gaze immediately obstructed that glimmer just coming into view, sealing off Subaru's path of escape. As Subaru choked on his words, Echidna closed one eye and said, "Your Return by Death is a Witch's Authority. Only she knows the principles by which it functions. As for whether your death triggers the rewinding of time, or shifts to a parallel world—the existence of which I find doubtful—or if 'you' overwrite a 'you' that exists in that world, I can only say there are nothing but possibilities. The facts are unknown."

"Parallel worlds…"

Echidna had deduced that parallel worlds might exist—so-called parallel world theory. By that way of thinking, when people in the world acted and made a choice, a reality branched off with each possibility, leading to countless planes of existence.

It was this very possibility of which Subaru, he who Returned by Death, was most afraid.

"Isn't there…isn't there any way to…to make sure?"

"—There is not."

"Ah…"

As Subaru clung to hope, Echidna cut him off with that heartless assertion.

The Witch's assertion slammed into Subaru, leaving him speechless, powerlessly sinking into his chair. Gazing at Subaru's state with a pained look, Echidna tapped the table with her fingers.

"All that worries you, only the Witch of Jealousy knows. —I am exceptionally upset that I cannot relieve you of this pain here and now."

In a form that differed from consoling, Echidna spoke with Subaru in a way that seemed to bring her closer to his heart.

If this was her being considerate, he was probably grateful enough to burst into tears. But at that moment, it was no salvation to Subaru.

—Even Echidna, one of the Witches of the Deadly Sins, could not expunge the crimes Subaru had created.

He'd hoped for a firm denial. A denial that the worlds Subaru had seen after his death did not exist.

If that was no good, he'd hoped for an assertion. An assertion

saying, *Your conceit has come at the cost of numerous sacrifices*.

With either reply, Subaru could fight. The reply would surely chastise him, drive the truth home so that he might never forget, and he would grit his teeth, tears of blood would flow, and his very soul would wail as he stepped forward.

"But in spite of that, there's not even…an answer…?"

With neither assent nor rejection, with the worlds dangling in the sky above, how could he resist?

Not even knowing whether he was the one doing the violating or the one being violated, he couldn't even cast aside the feeling of being discarded. Was it Subaru's punishment that he could not even acknowledge his crime?

No one could pass judgment on Subaru. No one could blame him. He understood that.

—But was even Subaru himself prevented from doing so?

"I think it is a terrible thing. But I also think there is no choice save to break with the past."

"…Break with the past?"

With sluggish movements, Subaru lifted his head and turned his face toward Echidna. Nodding toward his gaze, she adopted the most serious look she had to date as she said, "Certainly, the choices you have made to date might well have come with many casualties. What you may have left behind, what cannot be undone, is surely incalculable. But to simply count the things you have lost and to be a prisoner to them is very hollow indeed. Don't you think so?"

"Cut with the simple psychological arguments, would you? Gotta say, are my experiences something a little counseling is gonna solve?"

He didn't need consolation. Echidna's words were comfortable to the ears, but they were only to set him at ease.

If Subaru was a better human being, those words making his wounds shallower, making the crime he had committed lighter, might have had the greatest effect of all. —But he couldn't let himself think that way.

"If those worlds really do exist, there's absolutely no way to make up for what I've done. That can't be refuted—not by you, not by me. I absolutely can't be forgiven. It's not something that should be forgiven."

"

“If I do X, I can forgive myself… How can I accept embracing something like that? Even though I rejected your helping hand…the hand of that fake Rem…”

Pausing to breathe, Subaru’s face twisted and crumpled as he put the possibility he feared most into words.

“—If I get Rem back someday, is she really going to be the Rem I wanted to save?”

He’d left countless worlds behind. Among them, Subaru had left behind many people whom he had saved and many people who had saved him.

Among them were the Emilia he first met in the royal capital, the Rem who told him he was her hero, the Beatrice who supported him when his mind had been worn away, the Ram who had fought alongside him for Rem’s sake; he had so many memories of the days he had spent together with them, and those memories, and the people who had woven them, were fading away.

Even though this was so, even though a nigh-unendurable sense of loss was being pounded into him…

“Even so…you’re telling me to break with the past?”

“

“What do…you know about me…?”

“This is my dream, and I am the Witch of Greed. I know that in your own fashion, you have lived with all your strength, survived with all your spirit. That is why I say it. That is why I must.”

“

It was then that Echidna, who had not hesitated in her words a single time up to that point, began to prevaricate.

And with the Witch's face still faintly red, she consciously cleared her throat before continuing. "—Would you form a pact with me, Subaru Natsuki?"

Her voice was quiet, but it made him sense a powerful will.

The words made Subaru blink his eyes. It required several seconds of time before he understood them correctly.

"Pa…ct…?"

"We were speaking about something just before you left the last time around, yes? I was referring to this."

To Subaru, having a hard time following her words, Echidna flashed a very slight smile as she spoke. The words made him go back in his memories to the time just before a series of upheavals, and he remembered that such an exchange had indeed taken place.

Certainly, at the end of the previous tea party, Echidna had said it.

—That should there be a third tea party, there were things she wished to speak to Subaru about.

"By pact I mean a formal pact with the Witch of Greed. —Would you do this and form a bond between you and I?"

"Exchange a… What does that mean?"

"It is a simple matter. —Hereafter, when you slam into a wall that you can do nothing to overcome, you and I shall inspect that wall together. When you desire to hear someone's words, when you desire to convey words to someone, I shall make every effort. When you are ever on the verge of being crushed by your crimes, I shall bear them upon my shoulders."

Pausing her words, a bashful-looking smile came over Echidna.

"Would you not exchange such a pact with me?"

"…Wasn't the story since you're already dead, you can't interfere in the real world?"

"I suppose I am exceeding the remit of the dead. But we have already come this far, so I think there is no harm in it now. —If you will permit this, then…"

When Echidna put a hand to his chest, lowering her face, her voice made Subaru's eardrums tremble. The trembling spread within his body, progressively becoming tinged with heat, which together with the circulation of his blood traveled across the whole of his body.

Sensation returned to his numbed limbs. A strange heat was surging into the tip of his dry tongue and the back of his eyes.

He was at a loss at how to respond to the hand, the request, the proposal offered to him by the Witch.

He had vowed to continue to struggle. When he was on the verge of losing sight of what that meant, it was she—Echidna the Witch—who had bolstered his fracturing will.

"Oh yes, not to brag, but I have confidence in the extent of my knowledge. I should be able to provide plans to deal with the majority of problems you face, and no matter what preposterous difficulties may befall you, unlike the other people around you, no explanation will be necessary. After all, Return by Death is something shared between us."

"…The hell? Don't tell me, you're giving me a sales pitch for forming a pact?"

"I thought that raising the merits of forming a pact with me is a natural attitude for the proposing party to take. I am gambling that this may tilt your heart toward forming a pact even a tiny little bit. Calculations, you see. Calculations."

The aura of mystique she maintained until a moment before vanished as the Witch turned a smug face toward Subaru. That such a witch could appear so intimate made Subaru unwittingly slacken his cheeks.

Listlessly taken aback, short of breath—"Yeah," went Subaru, his voice trickling out.

Giving his body over to the grassland breeze, he slumped back in his seat as he gazed up, narrowing his eyes at the white clouds in that constructed blue sky, and as he gazed at that relaxed scenery, Subaru breathed easier.

When he hit a dead end, when he no longer saw an answer, when the time came to confront his troubles…

—If he could meet and exchange words under a blue sky like that, then…

"Maybe that's a good thing…"

"—Meaning?"

Spontaneously, or at least acting as such, Echidna knocked her chair back, leaning forward as she peered intensely at Subaru. When his eyes bulged at her excessive reaction, the Witch's cheeks reddened a bit as she replied. "Ah, er…yes. If you strenuously insist, I would be willing to form such a pact with…"

“Bit late to smooth that over now. Wait, I’m not the one asking, you… No, that’s wrong. In any case, it’s pretty cheap to talk about who went first.”

Echidna had done the proposing, but this was ultimately to save Subaru’s mind.

If he had to put it bluntly, this was the Witch’s kindness.

She was engaging in such clumsy theater for no reason save consideration for Subaru’s mental state.

He was incredibly weak. If Subaru Natsuki was unable to stand alone, then with someone’s aid, he might…

“

“—I’m putting that pact on hold.”

Smashing her fist into the ground, the blond, blue-eyed girl made that declaration with an imposing air.

The Witch of Wrath was glaring at the pair, her eyes filled with powerful anger.

## 3

Squatting on the impact-flattened ground, Subaru squinted up at the bearer of that angry gaze.

With bottomless anger in her blue eyes, the beautiful face of the Witch—Minerva—had a crimson hue. It was not toward the frozen stiff Subaru but to Echidna, standing at his side, to whom she turned a grave look as she said, “I repeat, I am putting this pact on hold. I do not approve of this pact.”

“…Hmm. To me, this is quite an unexpected development.”

The way she spoke held familiarity as well as enmity, displaying an attitude far too bloodthirsty to be called friendly.

As she trained that toward Echidna, Minerva stood at the center of the crater, crossing the arms with which she had used to make the mighty deformation, making her bountiful breasts bounce as she bit her lip.

“This is the occasion of a pact and a Witch’s pact at that. Even you are surely not incapable of understanding what an important ceremony this is. Or perhaps you had your eye on him, too… Is this envy?”

“Do not make light of this with your petty jokes. Do you not understand the reason I am angry like this? I am indignant. I am in a rage. You have driven me into a fury!”

When Echidna tried to sidestep with frivolities, Minerva shouted with anger, her face growing redder still. She was so high-strung that her eyes were filled with tears, with clear droplets trickling down the sides of her tender visage.

This was the very different sense of presence that Minerva—no, what was odd was not the sensation but the fact that she was there at all.

“…How are you here?”

“What?! Are you saying it’s wrong for me to come here like this?!”

“Not that. I’m not saying that…but I mean, Echidna’s, like, right

there."

As Minerva's cheeks puffed up with dismay, Subaru pointed toward Echidna. The pointing finger made Minerva cock her head, but Echidna went "Ah" in apparent understanding, clapping her hands together as she said, "Now I know the cause of your bewilderment. —You find it strange that she and I are together in the same place."

"Th-that's right. Before when you let me meet with the other Witches, you said you were lending yourself to let them borrow your existence, but this would mean that talk was—"

"She lied to you, then. This girl has a foul personality, prone to evil pranks for no good reason."

When Minerva smacked down his rebuttal, Subaru went, "No way," and looked at Echidna.

"Please do not misunderstand," Echidna stated as a preamble in response to his gaze. "Certainly, when I explained substitution was necessary, I lied but only about that single point. But their manifesting here presents a danger to me. If I, a soul alone at present, am defeated, the right to rule this place will be transferred. There is no guarantee that they would not angle for that."

"That's, ah, but just on account of that…"

"For example, if Sekhmet, the Witch of Sloth, was of a mind to do just that, I have no chance of victory. Though in the first place, if I made an enemy of her, she could slaughter me and the other four Witches put together in one second."

To Subaru, slow on the uptake, Echidna was revealing what had happened without a single shred of guilt. There were parts that he could accept and parts that, emotionally speaking, he could not.

But as that complicated mental state made Subaru grimace, Echidna continued, "Besides, perhaps I dislike other Witches crawling out of the woodwork out of concern one might whisk you away?"

"Er, um, what?"

"I find myself liking you more with every return. Not in life or death has a conversational partner made my heart leap so. Therefore, I want you all to myself. If you must declare me a fool for making one shallow lie for that sake…go ahead and laugh, if you like."

For her craving to monopolize ran very deep—a powerless smile came over Echidna as she revealed her true thoughts.

Left speechless, Subaru's thoughts wandered over Echidna's excuse—and in search of the reason for her obsessive spirit toward him. It wasn't just her; the Witch of Jealousy also saw Subaru as—

"What do you think you're doing, swallowing everything she says so easily?"

"—Dah?!"

As Subaru sank into thought, a powerful blow struck his head from behind.

The impact made his eyes spin. It seemingly had enough power to rip his head off—and yet, what occurred was not pain but a feeling of excessive exhilaration that blew lethargy out of his entire body.

The blond Witch who had done this made an exaggerated grimace with her adorable face and said, "And, you, stop letting Echidna take you for a ride with her flattery! That lightweight decision-making and empty-headed attitude is really ticking me off!!"

"Flattery makes it sound so underhanded. I am creating an opportunity between him and I only so that we might strive for greater understanding together. If I do say so myself, a pact is simply the result of having formed a bond of trust…"

"I'm telling you, change that 'I explained it properly already' attitude! Certainly, you've spoken with the boy about the good points of a pact. But as for the bad points of being in a pact! You haven't! Said! A single! Darn! Word!!"

Giving in to her anger, Minerva stamped her foot on the ground, making the grassland explode in a spectacular cloud of dust. Setting aside her overwhelming state of agitation, Subaru was aghast at the meaning of Minerva's words.

—Certainly, he had no memory of touching on the downsides of a pact during his back-and-forth with Echidna. He became self-conscious of how careless he'd been in not realizing that fact.

"W-wait. Whaddaya mean, downsides? There wouldn't be some huge exaggerated thing like…"

"You don't think there'd be any? You look on pacts too lightly, particularly where the Witch of Greed is concerned—she who came into contact with the most humans among all the Witches, whose words interfered with history."

"All of those were acts taken in life… Though I cannot say that all of those who formed pacts with me found happiness."

Minerva was thrusting before Subaru's eyes a side of the Witch he didn't know. Furthermore, as if to bolster the validity of the words, Echidna was, in the end, asserting that she meant no harm to Subaru.

Subaru was tormented by the pair's words, but emotionally he wanted to believe Echidna.

Of course he did. Ever since associating with Echidna at the tomb like that, they'd met several times over. She was also someone to whom he could divulge the circumstances he couldn't to anyone outside the dream, someone who understood Return by Death.

That was why, through the offer of cooperation that went by the name of pact, Subaru had found salvation.

As Subaru mulled it over, he stared at the white-haired Witch and the blond-haired Witch in turn. Emotionally, he doubtlessly tilted toward Echidna. However, Minerva's presence had him concerned.

Why had she leaped out? Previously, Minerva had leaped out to deliver healing via punches and save Subaru from impending death. This was the Witch of Wrath's reason for being.

That same Minerva had gone out of her way to cut into the conversation, something that had to give him pause.

"Echidna. When a pact is formed, there has to be a demerita… no, compensation."

"…I suppose there is. A pact requires compensation. Just as I am to provide you with my knowledge, you must offer me something to serve as compensation."

"If that's so, what do you want from me? —What do I have to offer you?"

That question was one that needed to be asked and answered before a pact was formed. Indulging in Echidna's benevolence, Subaru had sincerely forgotten that he had to offer her something, too.

—And just what compensation could a Witch extract from a fool at an impasse in a blind alley of fate?

"There is no need to be tense. There is no need for concern. The compensation I seek from you is not a difficult thing. For that matter, among the pacts I have formed to date, I would call it exceptionally forthright."

"…What, then?"

"It is a simple thing. What you feel, what you think, what is left

in your heart, the futures you know, the things you do, the possibilities you create, the fruits of all the ‘Unknowns’ that hail from your existence—I…wish to taste them.”

Her cheeks faintly reddened, Echidna confessed as if she was a young maiden in love.

The fruits of the Unknowns—the poetic, roundabout wording made Subaru knit his brow.

“That’s… Are you saying you’d pull my emotions and memories right out of me?”

“You say the most provocative things. You are mistaken. I simply want to see the scenery you see, to hear the music you hear, to stand in the place of knowing the Unknowns that spring forth from you. That is all it will take to satisfy me.”

As if to wipe away Subaru’s concerns, Echidna clarified what it was that she sought.

All that she wanted was to see Subaru walk off toward his destination and to gaze at the same scenery he did along the way. She wanted to know what Subaru felt, what Subaru knew, and the results of Subaru’s actions.

“That’s not a lie, is it?”

“The occasion of a pact is no place for lies. So that I may remain myself, I vow that I shall absolutely never turn my back upon these words. Even at the cost of my life.”

Touching a hand to her chest, Echidna added, “Though I am already dead,” concluding with a lighthearted demeanor.

He did not think that those words were lies. Perhaps that was simply what he wanted to believe.

But if it was just him wanting to believe, that was enough. If Subaru were to think that way, then—

“It is all…true, but…she has not…said every…thing?”

Just when Subaru was about to accept Echidna’s confession and try to send Minerva away, his shoulders jumped. It was a voice he had heard only tens of minutes before, and the sound anything but pleasant.

“The Witch of Lust…Carmilla!”

“S-stop… I’m not, doing anything… So don’t make such scary eyes… No…”

“I was born with this mean mug. This ain’t some kind of special glare meant just for you.”

With broken grassland separating Subaru and the pair of

Witches, a third Witch appeared from a position a short distance removed. Carmilla, dressed no differently from earlier, timidly stared down at her own feet.

She did not look toward Subaru. She did not meet anyone's eyes. But that did not mean she was silent.

"E-Echidna is…not lying…but she is hiding lots of things, okay?"

"She's hiding things…?"

At that late stage, no anger rose within him at successive Witches coming to stand before him. However, the Witches successively standing before him were making assertions one after the other that he could not simply let pass in silence.

The same went for Echidna. Toward the suddenly appearing Carmilla, she closed one eye and said, "Suddenly appearing and lobbing insults is very rude. In the first place, why are you giving him warnings? Unlike Minerva, you have no reason to give him your backing. You must despise him."

"A…r-reason like…Minerva? I have a proper… Mm, I don't. But, Echidna, you…deceived me…didn't you?"

Echidna's statement was orderly; in contrast, Carmilla's words were halting and broken. Eyes downcast, the Witch's speech pattern was frail. However, in contrast to her voice, her assertion was uncompromising.

Even as Carmilla's gaze timidly wandered, her demeanor stared straight at Echidna. "I don't…l-like this boy. But…Echidna because you…deceived me… People who do things to me I don't like are… *absolutely unforgivable*."

—Only the last phrase was so clear that he heard it distinctly.

It took some time before Subaru could comprehend what this meek Witch was saying. That was how much at variance that last phrase was from his image of the Witch to that point.

—In silence, without averting her eyes whatsoever, Carmilla stared at Echidna.

A vortex of emotion hard to put into words rested in her eyes—laying within was a somber darkness resembling hatred for those who bore enmity for her or who turned similar emotions toward her; this she absolutely could not forgive.

She was love of self-personified—that was the thought that rose in the back of Subaru's mind.

"Good grief. Even if it was necessary, making Carmilla do

something contrary to her will was a blunder on my part. Making an enemy of you is exceptionally troublesome, after all."

"That is…because everyone is my ally… Being hated by me is… terrible, you know…?"

By no means were meekness and militancy necessarily exclusive. Carmilla might have been introverted—so frail of personality that she could not even meet other people's eyes while conversing with them—but she would show no mercy to her enemies. The former was unrelated to the latter.

"What have you…? What have you people been talking about all this time?!"

And surrounded by the Witches' perilous atmosphere, Subaru finally exploded. Feeling the gazes of the three Witches turn toward him, Subaru had a desperate look as he pleaded his case.

"Quit cutting me out of the conversation already! It's my…it's my choice, damn it! Say it so I can understand! What's Echidna hiding?! What do you know?!!"

"Please do not lend your ears to these girls, Subaru Natsuki. I have made my vow. To waver here would be akin to doubting that vow. That would be simply too cruel…"

As Subaru raised his voice in anger, Echidna spoke with a calm, collected voice to the last.

Once more, Subaru began to feel like something was off about that calm, collected tone. Moving past the rising passion of his earlier mental state, he gave her words fresh scrutiny.

Why were the two Witches interrupting Echidna's words?

Something was odd. She hadn't said anything odd. She'd vowed that she was not lying. The other Witches acknowledged that, too. Then just where was the problem—?

"I shall repeat myself, Subaru Natsuki. Once you choose me, once you form a pact with me—I will, without fail, bring you to the future you desire."

"—*Sigh.* Bringing out 'without fail' at the very end is so cliché…"

"—!! Who is it this time?!"

As Echidna stretched a hand out toward him, her assertive words were weighed down by a languid voice.

When he looked over, he saw a bizarre creature opposite Carmilla, a mass of purplish-red tumbling abo— No, this was no bizarre creature. This was a person, a human being with such a

great amount of hair, it looked like a giant ball of fur.

She had hair reaching down as far as her toes, a sultry outfit that was primarily black, and a voluptuous, feminine physique. Her skin was so pale it was beyond notions of white; her sultry, beautiful face could not shake off that unhealthy impression.

The beautiful woman sat on the ground leaning on her hip, gazing at the scene with purple eyes—he knew at a glance she was a Witch.

"So what, you're the sixth…"

"Sekhmet, the Witch of Sloth, *sigh*. I thought I should at least introduce myself, *sigh*. In the end, I am simply insurance…of this place's equality, *phoo*. So I'm on watch duty to keep things in line, *sigh*."

"Equality? Insurance?"

"I will kill anyone who resorts to force, *phew*. I am the, *sigh*, restrictive force for that purpose, *phoo*."

Regularly peppering her speech with sighs, the Witch of Sloth—Sekhmet—told her story with a very personalized manner of speaking. In contrast to the tone of her voice, the contents were savage, but none of the Witches moved to object.

Echidna had said it just prior: Sekhmet could kill all the other Witches there put together.

But what of it? In that moment, just how many Witches were going to appear in that—

"Ohhh? Baru came? And everyone's together? That's rare, huh?!"

One after another, uninvited Witches crashed the already broken tea party.

With Gluttony and Pride now joining Greed, Wrath, Lust, and Sloth, this amounted to a reenactment of the nightmare that occurred four hundred years prior, and at the center of it, Subaru cried out.

The only one there to face the gathered Witches, the foolish, ordinary person named Subaru Natsuki shouted.

"Stop it! Stop screwing around! What do all of you want with me?! I just… I only wanted some way to get by! You're in the way of…!"

"I think I told you, *sigh*. The pillow talk at the end is very cliché, *phoo*."

"At the end…?"

Sekhmet's languid words weighed down Subaru's raspy shout. The other Witches said nothing about what Sekhmet spoke, save one, for Echidna slightly narrowed her eyes. "Sekhmet, you're—"

"I am not taking anyone's side, *sigh*. I just want to be courteous to the lad, *phoo*."

What she meant by courtesy or what coursed in the silence between Echidna and Sekhmet, Subaru did not know.

However, from what Sekhmet had said, the words of the Witches to that point, and from Echidna's responses and demeanor toward them, Subaru's contemplations finally led to a single hypothesis.

"

“No, I will not. This is something you should know better. Think about it.”

Faced with Subaru pressing the point, Echidna’s reply went far outside his desires. Her words were most certainly not ones that would clear up the doubts that Subaru harbored.

As Subaru shook his head side to side, repulsed by the warped nature of those words, Echidna spread both of her arms and continued, so that Subaru might comprehend her own thoughts, her own feelings—

“The Return by Death that you possess is an incredible Authority. You do not comprehend how it is truly to be used. You can redo the world any number of times before you arrive at the result that you desire. To a researcher, this is the ultimate ideal manifesting in physical form. Is that not so? By rights, you should only be able to obtain one result for any particular thing. You can make excessive amounts of varied deductions and suppositions about the results. But there is usually but a single result. You can never repeat the exact same conditions in search of a different result. The conditions all shift: time, environment, memory, procedures. ‘Back then, if I’d only changed one thing, the results would be different.’ This is not in the realm of ideals but of dreams and delusions. Because I have the heart of a researcher, your Authority truly makes my mouth water. With ‘identical conditions’ and ‘verification of differences’ secured, one can identify a ‘proper result’ and a ‘variant result.’ How could I not covet that? With it before me, how could I not test various possibilities? Of course, I will not coerce you to use Return by Death. You will use that power for the sake of the result you desire. And I shall lend my wit as much as you please so that your desire might be granted. I have high hopes that the great many results that shall be borne from this shall serve to satisfy my inquisitive mind. No one would punish a girl for wanting such a small thing, surely? Your desire for a future and my curiosity shall be satisfied together. Perhaps this makes you uneasy, for I do not know the future, either. I will not purposefully lead you to a mistaken future in order to test the results. All Unknowns are equal before me. By mulling and struggling against the same problems, the answer will come. This makes necessary the highest form of relationship between us. I swear I shall protect you with all my heart. But that does not change the fact that I cannot interfere with reality. If a physical obstacle stands before you, I can expect that challenging it will break your mind and body many times over. If it comes to that, I genuinely intend to exert my every power to protect your mind. I will not tell you there are no ulterior motives involved in that. But I don’t want you to think that I am calculating everything because of my inquisitive mind. I do think fondly of you, and it is a fact that my maidenly heart wishes to be of aid to you. I am repeating myself, but you and I are ideally

compatibility. I can say it plainly. I will use your power, and you will use me for the sake of your 'optimal future.' It is my genuine desire to be a woman used for your own convenience. Though it would only be in this dream world, should you desire it, I do not mind using this body of mine to comfort you. I shall happily grant it to you. Oh my, that might not be the best thing for the people you care for, that silver-haired half-elf and that blue-haired demon… they who you have sworn to save and protect without fail. Not that I can claim any particular opinion toward them, but at any rate, please take it as expressing how strong, how unshakable my feelings are. Many difficulties shall befall you in the future as well. Your resolve shall lead you to challenge them, but that is tragic. I will become the beacon that lights your path. So, too, will I be the bonds you wish to protect. Your questions, your burdens, your feelings, your hopes…unexpectedly, through the Trial, you have taught me just how much value these things hold. Certainly, to you, the scenes you saw might have been Hell itself. But given the choice between knowing beforehand and ignorance, I wish to praise the will to learn even such tragic facts. With these serving as your gruel, you shall stretch a hand toward the future, even at the cost of your life. That Trial was necessary so that you might learn there might be sacrifices made for that future's sake. As you use Return by Death more and more, perhaps your emotions might fray, perhaps the deaths of people precious to you might fail to move your heart, but most of all, you might have to lose some part of yourself in order to arrive at the place at which you are destined to reach. The Trial prevented that end. I did that, in order to protect you. If those scenes pained your heart, putting you on the verge of breaking, I do not exaggerate in saying I did it for that sake. Because it would serve as the linchpin for your moving forward, I accepted it. With my words, I shall grant you the strength to advance forward. I will console you, I will scold you, I will even love you. Or if it is hatred you require, I will devote that to you, all for you. You like girls who devote themselves to you, yes? You need me. By yourself, you cannot grasp the future. It is none other than I who is the most suitable girl for you. —You need me. And I need you. Already, there is none other than you who can satisfy my curiosity. I mean, I've already discovered you. You broadened my world. Through you, I, said to be the Witch bearing the greatest intellect in the world, have tasted the fruit of the Unknown once

more. If you want to use that power to save someone, then save me. Having even the crumbs of that noble thought is enough for me. Please. I want you to trust me. Perhaps you think I deceived you because of the fact that I did not expose enough of what I truly thought beforehand. I wanted to get the timing right. If I exposed these feelings while our relationship was still shallow, you would probably have pushed me away. I did not want that. I could not endure that. That goes for you too, yes? If you lost me as a collaborator, your heart would surely be broken. We are both working toward our optimal ends. And I know what that optimal end is. I can help you. Through infinite trial runs, you will arrive at the future, albeit with your heart worn down and scarred by the ordeal. Let me do this. I will never betray your trust. Certainly, my heart might be attracted to the resulting choices, and my inquisitive heart may waver toward paths other than that which is optimal. I cannot hold my own greed in check enough for me to tell you that will never happen. I acknowledge that. But I will gloss over nothing. I will speak openly and honestly. Even if the result of that will damage your trust, I will expend no effort to win that trust back. No matter what might happen, I will, without fail, bring you to the future you desire. I absolutely, absolutely will. So as the choices necessary for that become clear, would you not let me be the one to choose? It will be precisely according to the preamble for the pact: I will grant what you desire, what it is that you seek. It will be no more and no less than this. After that, how much you permit your body to be sliced for the sake of that which you desire and crave is up to you. I have conveyed my resolve. Next, I want to hear yours. I want you to demonstrate that you, who would form a pact with me, who would benefit from my cooperation, have the enduring spirit required to arrive at the future without fail. It is you, the first and only one to overcome the second Trial, who can puff out your chest and speak these words with pride. Do this, please me, and I shall release you from the tomb and guide you to the third Trial. Beyond that rests the liberation of the Sanctuary. In so doing, the precious people most important to you, the people you care about held captive in the Sanctuary, will be saved. For the sake of this, you will undergo a true Trial. For the sake of that, seize me, use me, do with me as you please as you let your greed rage, and we shall grasp the future together. This is everything I have to offer to aid you and find what you desire, what you seek. I intend to peel

back everything honestly and earnestly. I will not allow the other girls around us to interfere any longer. It is as you said: This is a matter between you and I alone. I want you to give me your answer. I have told you everything… Truly the naked truth. Passionately. This might be close to love. A vow of love. So how will you respond to my love? I want a reply. This reply, after all, will be another thing serving to satisfy my curiosity."

—With that, Echidna smiled adorably.

Her fleeting, snow-like hair rustled, her cheeks faintly red from excitement, standing there with the look of a maiden at her most vulnerable, fresh from offering her confession, waiting with all her heart for Subaru's reply.

With upturned eyes, she gazed toward him, Subaru's face reflected clearly in her black eyes. Subaru slowly shifted his gaze from them, looking at the other Witches gathered around. The five Witches besides Echidna were each in various states, watching and awaiting the result of Echidna's confession in their own way.

Sekhmet, languidly; Carmilla, disinterestedly; Daphne, with a repulsive smile; Typhon, tilting her head with a mystified look; for some reason, Minerva alone had a face ready to burst into tears.

It was funny. He was tempted to laugh. —Not that he actually did.

"Echidna."

"What is it?"

"You'll be…using me?"

She'd be using him. Such words were repeated over and over as Echidna had spoken.

Echidna nodded unreservedly in response.

"I will. You should simply use me back. That is the purpose of our pact. If you wish to rebuke me for using it as a means of not letting go of you, I shall gladly hear it. This is the truth, after all."

"It's not as if I didn't think about it. That's how relationships based on pros and cons work. I expected—I was resolved to your intentions not being a hundred percent benevolent. But."

In front of Echidna, Subaru covered his face with his hands. He turned his face toward the sky in a simple…lament.

"But this is just too much…"

"

determination to form a pact.

—Cruelly, all those things had come back to mock the foolishness of Subaru Natsuki.

“I do not really understand what your problem is. If you are to arrive at the optimal result, you must resign yourself to a certain degree of injury. That is your decision to make, something I believe I have already acknowledged, so…”

“Me resigning to… Not that I’ve resigned to it, but that’s dancing to your tune, ain’t it?”

“Unsurprisingly, you find that hard to accept. In the end, it is you who must draw the conclusion. I am merely aiding you to do so. If you wish to place the responsibility for that with me, that would put me in a bind. That’s a horrible thing to do, don’t you think?”

Pursing her lips, Echidna made a pouty face as she protested. It seemed like a childish display of emotion, out of place enough to make one laugh, but it only served to deepen Subaru’s misgivings.

Those doubts had been there from the beginning. Now they had only grown stronger. She acted so unwitchy, and many times, the gap between the subjective and the objective had instilled ease rather than discomfort.

However, at the present, that foreboding he felt strengthened, enlarged, and took definable form—

“—There’s no sense of seriousness anywhere in your attitude. Everything you do and say feels…superficial.”

“

“This is another place you should be getting angry, see.”

“…Is that so? I should have taken this moment to make my voice coarser and shower insults upon you, then? I see, I will make a note of that. If we should meet again, I shall put that knowledge to good use.”

When Echidna replied with those words, all emotion vanished from the Witch’s face.

All emotions worthy of the name vanished, and a Witch appeared in their stead. For the very first time, Subaru truly set eyes upon the Witch of Greed.

“

And so Subaru asked the Witch a question relating to Echidna that, during the loop that had begun with the Sanctuary, remained a mystery. Namely—

"—You know Beatrice, don't you, Echidna?"

"Of course I know her. I am deeply related to that girl's birth. What of it?"

There was nothing hidden in Echidna's reply. She simply could not guess what Subaru's question was getting at.

He closed his eyes. On the back of his eyelids, he traced his last glimpse of the girl as she vanished. There was nothing sadder than the thin expression of relief on her face.

Subaru had been unable to save Beatrice from the centuries she had spent in loneliness. When he'd shouted to the girl at the time, her final smile of relief was seared forever into his eyes. That was why—

"Beatrice, has been waiting all this time for That Person to arrive, according to the pact. That pact has to be one you made with her. You tied her to that mansion. That's about right?"

"I did not specify the place, but it is indeed I who commanded her to protect the archive of forbidden books and wait until someone came."

"Then…then who is this That Person? What has to be done to free her?"

For four centuries, Beatrice had continued to await That Person, alone in the archive of forbidden books.

A promise had made her do so. A pact had strengthened her isolation. Even Beatrice did not know who That Person was. Subaru hadn't found any clue, either.

But Echidna, the Witch who had commanded her to wait for That Person, surely knew the answ—

"I wonder, just who might it be?"

"—H-uh?"

"Er, I am not making some kind of joke. I think that from the bottom of my heart. Who do you think That Person who Beatrice waits for might be?"

As Subaru gaped at her, Echidna shrugged her shoulders, appearing genuinely mystified. Subaru was aghast at her demeanor, but he immediately shook his head. He couldn't accept this.

"Y-you're telling me you don't know who Beatrice is waiting for, either?"

“Mm, I do not. I know not who That Person Beatrice awaits might be.”

“Why n…? You’re the one who told her to wait, right? So how can you not…?”

Subaru was dumbfounded at the one thread he clung to having been snipped like it was nothing.

That Person Beatrice had been commanded to wait for *had* to exist. Was it even possible that Echidna did not know? Or was some third part going to suddenly pop up and—

“You are wrong, Subaru Natsuki. You misunderstand. It is most certainly I who made Beatrice promise to wait for That Person. But you have a fundamental misunderstanding about this.”

“‘Fundamental misunderstanding’…?”

“You misunderstand the reason behind the pact I formed with Beatrice. You believe I made Beatrice promise for the sake of handing the archive of forbidden books to That Person, I take it?”

He didn’t understand what Echidna’s assertion meant. It was natural, even obvious, to take it that way.

She’d been told to hold on to something and to wait for someone. Therefore, the objective was obviously for her to hand that thing over.

However, Echidna met Subaru’s thought process with a sideways shake of her head.

“That was not my objective. You see…I made Beatrice promise to wait for That Person because I want to know who that girl selects to be That Person.”

result in itself. Having been unable to comfortably select anyone she had met to date, continuing to obey the pact while full of worry, and desiring her own death is another result."

"And what do you think about that?"

"—? I think that it is a marvelous thing?"

As if asked a question to which the answer was obvious, Echidna tilted her head without a single hint of shame.

Her reply, her demeanor, and the expression on the girl in the back of Subaru's mind gave him his answer.

He'd decided. He understood. He grasped it, loud and clear.

—Then and there, he would confront her and make perfectly clear exactly who was mistaken.

"Echidna, you are…a Witch."

"

“—So she’s come.”

“H-hey…this doesn’t…concern me anymore…so, ahhh…”

“At a troublesome time, a troublesome girl has come to make trouble, *sigh*.”

“Ahaaa. My stomach’s reaaally, reaaally throbbing. We really have the full lineup now, huhhh?”

The spectating Witches displayed various reactions to the change taking place.

One bit her lip; one clutched her head; one gave a sigh; one licked her lips.

The Witches’ gazes shifted behind Subaru—and from there, an overwhelming, impossible-to-ignore presence sprang forth.

As Subaru was facing her, Echidna caught sight of “it” straight in front of her. Her eyes widened slightly, and within them, Subaru saw a complex vortex of emotions—be it before or after her true nature had been exposed, this was the first time he saw hatred in them.

“

# AFTERWORD

Hey, everyone! I, Tappei Nagatsuki, also known as the Mouse-Colored Cat, am deeply indebted to you all!

Thank you for purchasing and reading *Re:ZERO*, Volume 12! Sorry for delivering this greeting in smaller characters than usual. Er, those who have read the book should understand, but this time, we really, really packed every page, line, and sentence that we could!

Seriously, not a single line was wasted! This might have been my most nerve-racking work to date!

Now then, inside this twelfth volume, which was such a ferocious battle for the author, I must say that Subaru had a pretty hard time, too. Those of you who have been with me since the Web novel probably waited a long time for this, when unescapable consequences for Return by Death are finally touched upon.

Subaru was buffeted by the circumstances and by the people around him, and finally even Return by Death gave his heart a pummeling, but I urge you to get your hopes up for what happens next in Volume 13!

Well, that was brief, but you can see the space allotted to me this time around, so let me quickly move on to the established custom of giving thanks!

Editor I, this time everything really was right up to the line, but I am confident that no matter how close we cut it, Subaru had it worse. Thank you for believing in me. Volume 13 will be rough,

too!

To Otsuka the illustrator, this time we had the final two Witches and the reappearance of the Beast Master, etc. Thank you for the adorable, stylish illustrations. Otsuka, your drawing ability is always of help to me, but truly thank you very much for helping make this such a strong volume!

To Kusano the cover designer, I am honored that you whittled things down to such a good-looking cover that's so stylish, it's almost un-*Re:ZERO*-ish. (?) They truly feel like "dark sisters." Thank you very much.

Handling the comic versions, Daichi Matsuse and Makoto Fugetsu are publishing comics in the same month! With Fugetsu's version finally completing Arc 2, and Matsuse's version finally reaching "From Zero," it's a stampede of exceptional developments. The feeling of both reaching the places they were always meant to is incredible! That said! As we are sticking together for a while longer, I ask for your best regards!

As for others, such as everyone in the editorial department of MF Bunko J and everyone involved in distribution at bookstores, thank you very much as always. Each time, I truly feel the greatness of your cooperation ever more strongly.

And finally, to all those readers who have bought this book, enjoyed this tale, and cheered on our anguished hero, my greatest thanks of all goes to you.

I'm working hard for *Re:ZERO* in 2017, too! Please show me the same patronage as before!

Well, let's meet next at Volume 13! Thank you! Ohhh, thank you!

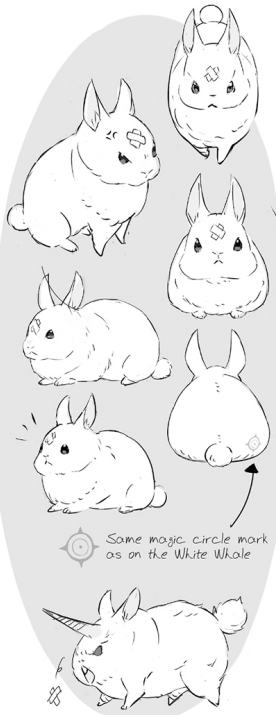
*February 2017 <<Motivation blazing right after attending the* Re:ZERO *Series Closing Event>>*

# SHINICHIROU OTSUKA

We're revealing early designs to the public again!

## GREAT RABBIT
Early Version

I originally designed them with adhesive bandages over where the horns are supposed to grow from.




## SEKHMET
Early Version

I've had lingerie stuck in my head since last volume, so Sekhmet was also originally in her underwear...

Shinichiro Otsuka

“Elsa, oh, Elsaaa. Hey, are you listening?”

“Yes, I am listening. What is this, the next volume preview? It would seem to be my next contract. It will be fun seeing what the next opponent’s entrails look like.”

“…I should point out I don’t think the announcement corner includes the sort of contents that would make Elsa happy. It’s basically introducing people to information about *Re:ZERO*.”

“—? Then I do not understand why we have been contracted to do this…”

“I did not think Elsa would prove this unreliable, either. Er, anyway, let’s begin. First, in the same month of March that this *Re:ZERO*, Volume 12, goes on sale, comic versions for both Arc 2 and Arc 3 seem to be on sale as well.”

“That would be Volume 5 of the Alive version and Volume 4 of the BG version going on sale. The second arc is finally complete… The story seems to involve the boy whose belly I cut being transported to the mansion.”

“Actually, I’m pretty involved in the background of that incident, see. The other book should be coming out close to this Volume 12, too, so be sure to check it out, ’kay?”

“After that, there should be a next volume preview, but when does Volume 13 go on sale, I wonder?”

“*Uhu-hu-hu.* Volume 13 seems to be scheduled to go on sale this

June. Also, also, this isn't the only important announcement. Wanna hear, wanna hear?"

"I suppose so. Not that I have any particular interest, mind…"

"*Boo.* Elsa, you really cannot read the mood…"

"But since you want to speak of it, I shall listen. Say your piece."

"Ah! Actually, it's been decided the *Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-* series will have an illustration book published! Shinichirou Otsuka-sensei's *Re:ZERO* illustrations are all adorable and pretty, so they're finally coming out with an entertaining book with that outlook. Hey, are you happy? You're happy, aren't you?"

"Yes, that is splendid, splendid. It is good to see you so happy, Meili."

"Somehow that reaction was a little off from what I expected, but oh well. As for the all-important publication date, it's scheduled for September 2017. Wait just a bit for updates on the public home page and Twitter, 'kay?"

"It would seem that this wraps it up for announcements… I somehow find this hard to digest."

"Sheesh, I told you at the start that it wasn't gonna go like Elsa hoped for… Oh well, can't be helped. Well, it's a little early, but how about we go play with Mister over there?"

"Ahhh, that would be nice. I will probably have an opportunity to find out for sure next volume…but before that, the boy and I shall be joined in an orgy of flesh and blood. That shall be splendid indeed."

"*Hoh-hoh-hoh.* Poor Mister. Before I let Elsa bully him, I'd better play with him lots and lots first. So much fun."

"Yes, that shall be truly, truly—entertaining."

**Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.**

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink